

Will you be my festar-man? Love and courtship in the New Asgardian court (or, How Loki Stopped Worrying and Proposed to Stephen Strange)

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Will you be my festar-man? Love and courtship in the New Asgardian court (or, How Loki Stopped Worrying and Proposed to Stephen Strange)

by [AuroraWest](#), [Nonexistenz](#)

Summary

In eight years, the subject of marriage has come up between Loki and Stephen Strange. Nothing much ever comes of it. The two of them are as good as married in the eyes of whatever Earth institution wants to have a say in it, as far as Loki is concerned.

Then, Stephen proposes.

The thing is—Loki can't just *accept* a proposal. He's an Asgardian prince. It wouldn't be right. No. Stephen has to be *courted*. There's a way to do this, a traditional Asgardian way, and if Loki's going to do it, he's going to do it right.

Things go about as well as you'd expect.

Notes

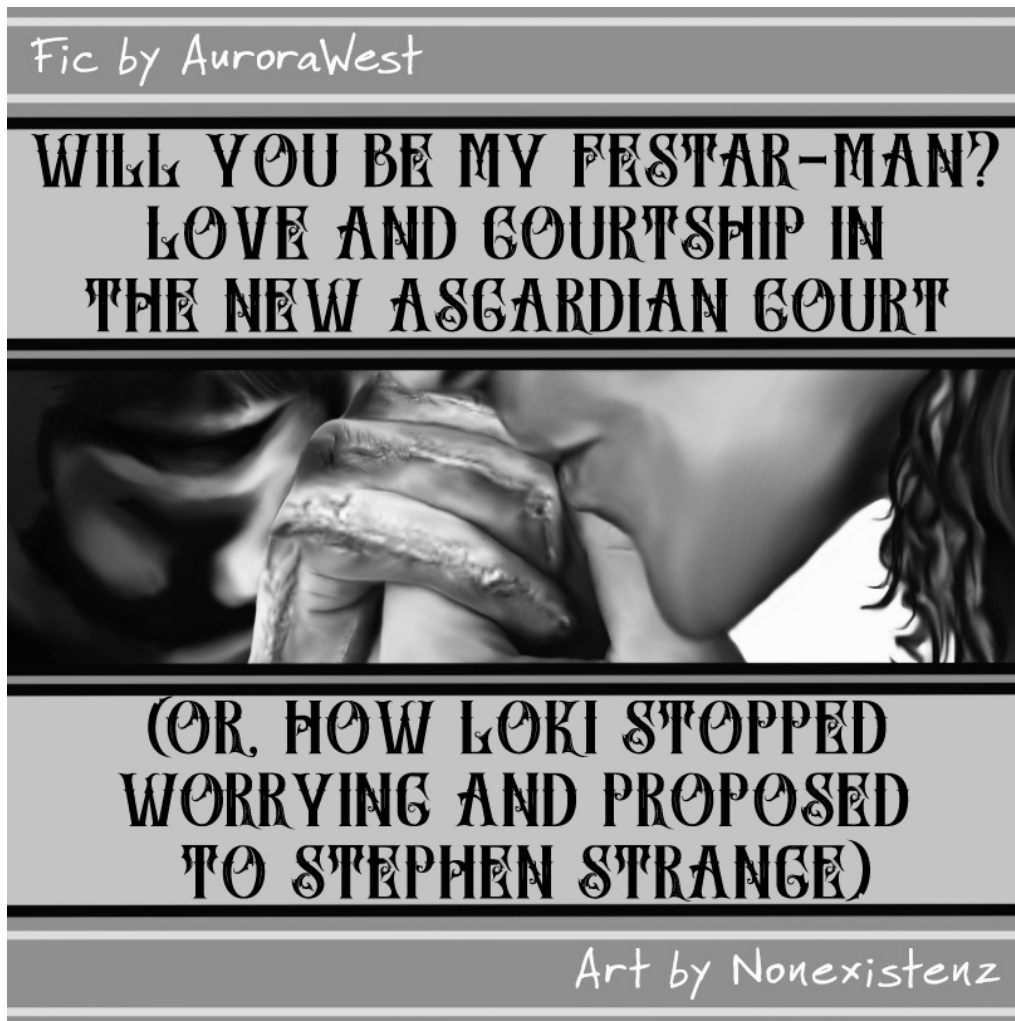
This was written for the 2020 Marvel Reverse Big Bang. The art is by the incredible nonexistenz, who is a wonderful artist and all around amazing person who I'm unbelievably

lucky to get to collaborate with!

Like most of my fic, this takes place within my fic universe, though it's set quite a ways in the future. This one takes place in 2038. I hope you enjoy it!

As always, thank you so much to my beta and sounding board, [mareebird](#), without whom my fics would be much poorer.

Proposal



It was one of those things that Loki would look back on for years to come—probably the rest of his life—and wonder, *what exactly was it, in that moment, that changed things?*

Because the thing was, they'd talked about this. Sort of. Once in a while through the years, at least. There had been eight of them so far—years, that was. Eight years of flying back and forth from Norway to New York, of climbing into bed alone in New Asgard only to hear a portal hiss open and feeling arms slip around him, even though they'd agreed not to see each other for a few more days (this had been futile from the very beginning, but they persisted in the facade). Eight years of reading together, of keeping the forces of evil at bay together, of navigating an interspecies romance together. Eight years of sarcasm and cleverness and music and Loki laughing harder than he'd like to admit at stupid jokes. Eight years of magic—literal magic, but also, if Loki was feeling sentimental, the magic of what was between them, and how much he loved Stephen Strange.

In eight years, the subject of marriage had come up, usually in a vague way; as in—"Should we talk about getting married?" But it never went beyond that, and that was fine. Loki knew that Stephen's parents' marriage had been bad, and this was his earliest example of what matrimony looked like; that there was a persistent connection in his mind between marriage and the crumbling of a romantic relationship.

Human marriage traditions meant little to Loki—as far as he was concerned, they were as good as

married in the eyes of whatever Earth institution wanted to have a say in it. He had been dragged to several human weddings during his years on Earth, and they seemed mostly to involve overwrought vows to love each other through whatever trials life brought. Loki had made *that* decision the moment he'd finally admitted to himself that he was hopelessly in love with a human wizard. Wearing a suit and standing in front of a group of people, professing it out loud for all of them, felt performative and pointless.

Loki hadn't even thought about it for at least a year. He certainly wasn't thinking about it at this particular moment. What he was thinking about, actually, was not getting run through with an ugly looking spear that was crackling with energy.

"So," Loki asked, snapping a wrist and sending a spell careening towards his attacker's face. They were on some planet or another, the name of which he'd known at one point, but forgotten right around the time an A'askavarii had taken the first swing at his face. There were trees, grass, and some lovely flowers that had been trampled by the fight. Thoroughly unremarkable, in other words. Though the sky was a pretty pink color, he'd give it that. "Did you *know* the Vampa-Cabra warriors had allied themselves with the A'askavarii?"

Stephen ducked one of the spears and spun a hand, calling up a shield and blocking a tentacle that an A'askavarii was swinging at his face. "I mean, you hear things."

"That's a 'no,' then?"

A spear flew through the air towards them and Stephen did something unnecessarily complicated, folding space so that the spear looped around and doubled back on the A'askavarii who had thrown it, skewering them. "The A'askavarii are supposed to be peaceful," Stephen said.

As a Vampa-Cabra warrior threw itself, screaming, at Loki, its fangs bared, Loki replied, "Yes well, no one seems to have told *them* that."

With another shriek, the Vampa-Cabra warrior clawed at Loki. Moving his dagger from one hand to the other, Loki stabbed it in the face, spluttering as blood sprayed across his mouth. It fell back and Loki caught it by the front of its armor, then swung it into the path of an oncoming A'askavarii, which knocked both of them to the ground.

"This is why you just *take* things when you need them, by the way," Loki informed Stephen.

Scoffing, Stephen sent a spell towards a Vampa-Cabra, then said, "Oh, right. *That's* a good look; the Sorcerer Supreme just showing up and taking things without asking."

"Well—" Loki sent his own blast of magic at two Vampa-Cabra trying to come at them from behind. "—clearly you didn't ask nicely enough."

A hoard of Vampa-Cabra warriors and A'askavarii grouped and ran towards the two of them. Loki braced himself, flipping his knife into position and wishing he hadn't thrown the other one into the chest of an A'skavarii who had promptly stumbled away. He'd have to dig through bodies later to find it. Beside him, Stephen dug his heels into the ground and hit his wrists together, summoning two rotating shields to his hands.

Then, something streaked through the air and straight into the group of attackers, sending them stumbling and falling to the ground. It came straight towards them, unfurling as it reached them and dropping Loki's missing dagger into his hand. As the Cloak of Levitation settled back on Strange's shoulders, Loki nodded to it. The collar rippled.

This was not the life he'd envisioned for himself. He loved it.

The Cloak's arrival had bought them some time, but the A'askavarii and Vampa-Cabra were regrouping, and this time, there were more of them. "You know," Loki said, "we could just leave."

Shaking his head, Stephen said, "We have to get that converter. Shuri needs it."

Loki rolled his eyes. "She's a delightful woman, but I'm only *so* willing to risk my life for professional acquaintances." By this time, their enemies had completely surrounded them. Loki shifted his grip on his knives and said, "I could try that new spell."

Stephen snapped his head around to look at Loki, an alarmed expression on his face. "What? No way. You said yourself it took more raw power than you have—"

"I was just being modest." Sliding his knives back onto their sheaths on his forearms, Loki straightened up and cracked his knuckles. "And I didn't want you to feel inferior, Strange. I know how easily bruised your ego is."

"Loki—"

But Loki waved him into silence as he closed his eyes and gathered his strength for the spell he was about to cast. It was true that he'd never actually attempted it, and he *had* said that it would require more power than he was normally capable of. It was possible that it was beyond him. It was possible, he supposed, that it could kill him. Quite honestly though, he'd cheated death so many times at this point that he'd only laugh if this was the thing to do him in.

And as far as attempting something that wasn't really all that wise, well—when had *that* ever stopped him?

His veins hummed with magic as he breathed deeply, drawing it from every cell in his body, letting it gather behind his sternum in one incandescent singularity of energy. Time slowed around him; the air seemed to thicken. Next to him, Stephen wasn't just a presence, he was a sink of his own power, which Loki could reach for if he needed it. For one slow-motion, underwater moment, Stephen was nothing but a glowing aura of magic and light, bright enough that Loki could see it even through his closed eyelids.

There was so much power there. Loki knew he could reach out and take it if he wanted to. But he didn't take from Stephen. They were a team. He hadn't asked—so he left all that power alone.

He opened his eyes. The hoard of Vampa-Cabra and A'askavarii was closing in, energy-charged spears raised. Lazily, Loki held out a hand. Though he obviously didn't have the power to control time and never had, it seemed truly to stop.

Then, a soundless wave of green energy flowed from him. Everything went silent, as though cotton was wadded in his ears; as though a silent explosion had sucked all the sound from the world. The air rippled, warping and twisting as though space itself was bending.

Sound returned to the world. And the Vampa-Cabra and A'askavarii vanished.

Well, all except one. Must have been outside the radius of the spell. He was still running at them, but at the sudden disappearance of his compatriots, he slowed, looking around in confusion. Loki pulled out a knife and sent it flying with a flick of his wrist. The blade sank into the Vampa-Cabra warrior's throat and he fell, dead.

Loki stood still, chest heaving with exertion. He flexed his fingers. It seemed he wasn't dead.

Smiling slightly, impressed with himself, he turned on his heel to face Stephen, knowing he would *have* to be impressed, as well.

When he turned, Stephen was staring at him, his mouth open, his eyes wide. There was an expression on his face that Loki couldn't read. It was as though he had never quite seen Loki—as though, perhaps, he was looking at a stranger. No, that wasn't right. It was more that he was looking at Loki as though he was seeing him in an entirely new light, as though Loki had been one thing, but was suddenly another.

Loki felt his brow furrow. “What?”

Stephen blinked and shut his mouth. He stared at Loki. Then, he said, “Marry me.”

Sound seemed to leave the world again, though this time, it had nothing to do with magic. Loki could do nothing but stare. Had that been—had Stephen just—was this—was he—what?

“I beg your pardon?” Loki asked.

“Marry me,” Stephen repeated, sounding just as sure, just as convinced of himself, as he had the first time.

Loki's face felt frozen. Something seemed to be keeping him from breathing. He turned his head, seeing the converter nearby, abandoned on the ground where the Vampa-Cabra had dropped it upon vanishing from this plane of existence. Without a word, he strode over to it, scooped it up off the ground, and brought it back to Stephen. He pushed it into Stephen's hands, then said, “I'll see you on Friday, like we agreed?”

“Um.” At this, Stephen's expression finally faltered. “Yeah. Friday. Sure.”

“Good. Give Shuri my regards.” Loki licked his lips and allowed his sling ring (illegal, but Kamar-Taj either hadn't noticed its absence or they were overlooking it) to materialize on his fingers. Circling a hand, he opened a portal. “I'll see you then.”

He stepped through it, leaving Stephen gaping behind him, onto the patch of grass outside his home in New Asgard, Norway.

The portal snapped shut. Wind gusted off the sea, blowing through his hair and flattening the grass around him. It smelled like brine and cold and wildness, and Loki breathed deeply. The sun was going down behind the cliffs and fingers of thick yellow light were reaching out over the fjord as the sky turned a deep, slate blue in the east. Twilight would come soon, but it would never get dark enough for most of the stars to come out, not in July.

Loki ran a hand through his hair and blasted air out through his nose.

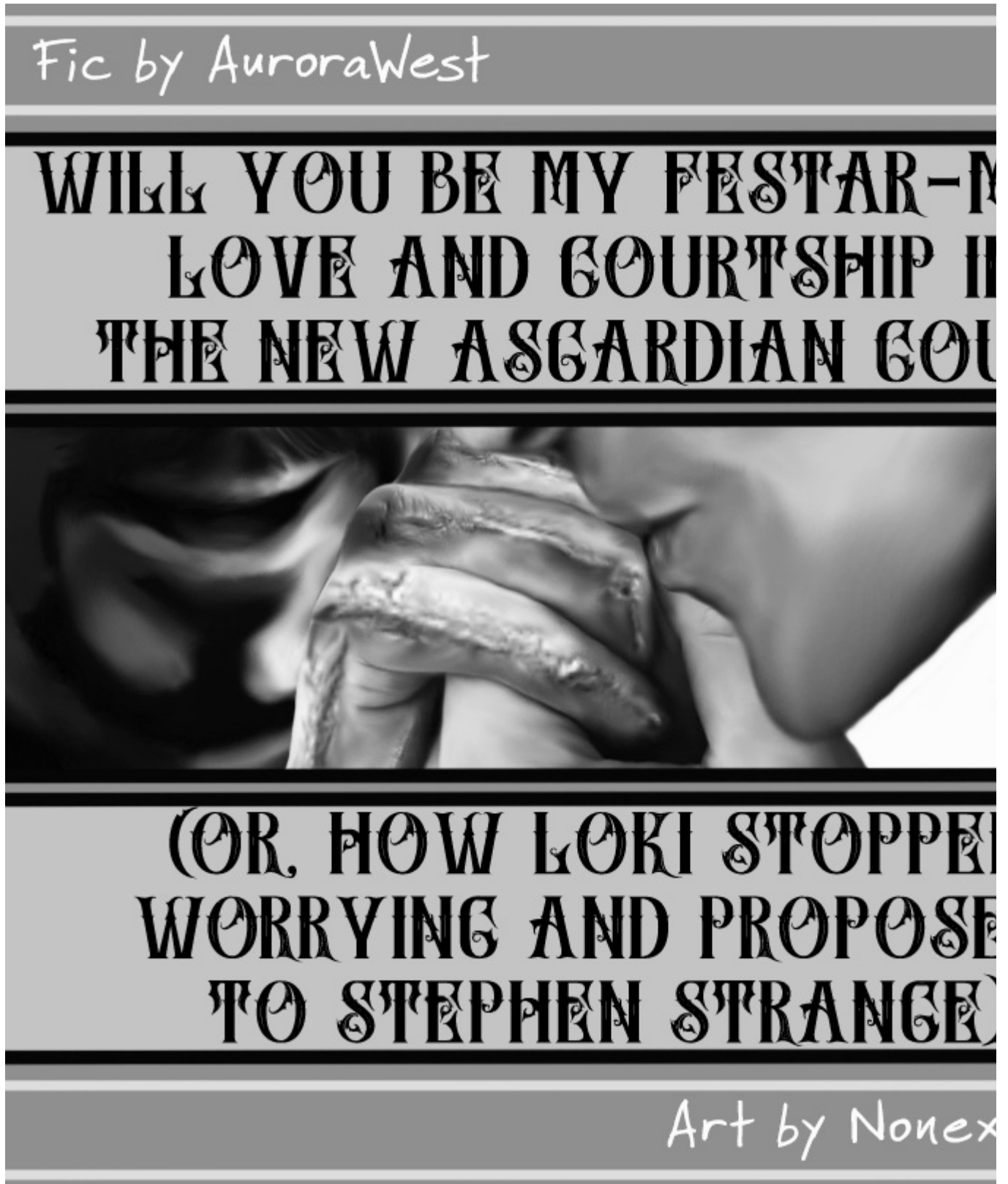
Shit.

It's Tradition

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



“You’re receiving text messages, Loki.”

“What?” Groggily, Loki lifted his head. He was on the sofa. There was drool on one side of his face. His hair was plastered against his head and felt both greasy and frizzy at the same time. Good thing it was only Thor standing there staring at him. Why was he on the sofa and not in his bed? Why was he still in his leathers? Was that blood on his sleeve?

He struggled to sit up and his stomach lurched somewhere into the region of his esophagus. Oh. The empty bottle of Contraxian whiskey across his legs might have held the answers to all those questions. Well, perhaps not the blood. Norns. Now that he was sitting up, his head was pounding. He always swore he was going to stop drinking this stuff, and he always broke that promise. It was just so *effective* for getting drunk quickly.

On the other side of the room, his phone buzzed. Thor picked it up. “It’s been doing this all morning,” he said. “I think whoever it is wants to talk to you.”

Loki didn’t say anything in response to this, because now that he was slowly waking up, it was obvious who was texting him. As the phone buzzed again, Thor said, completely obviously, as far as Loki was concerned, “It’s Stephen.” Then, he glanced at the screen. “He wants to know if you’re alright. He says, ‘Seriously, you never sleep in this late—’”

“Don’t read my texts,” Loki snapped.

Thor tossed the phone at him and Loki caught it. At least his reflexes weren’t totally gone, despite how hungover he was. Loki expanded the texts. Yes, it was Stephen—though there weren’t as many as Thor was making out. Quickly, he unlocked the phone.

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

I’m fine, don’t worry

That done, he locked it again and put it face down next to him on the sofa.

“So,” Thor said, coming over and crossing his arms over his chest. When Loki looked up at him and raised his eyebrows, Thor raised his in return. “Are you going to tell me why you drank our last bottle of Contraxian whiskey and passed out on the sofa last night when you got home?”

“You’re not supposed to drink this stuff, anyway,” Loki said, delicately picking the bottle up by the neck and setting it upright on the floor. Some of the whiskey had dribbled across his pants. Hopefully he hadn’t gotten any on the sofa.

Thor cleared his throat.

Running a hand through his hair, Loki looked up at his brother. They had come a long, long way, the two of them. Twenty-five years ago, there would have been no chance of the conversation they were about to have, regardless of how drunk or hungover Loki was. Now, he didn’t even hesitate, except to marvel over the fact that he didn’t.

“Stephen asked me to marry him,” Loki said.

In the silence that followed this, Loki could hear the sound of the waves souging against the shore, carried on the breeze through the open windows. The curtains fluttered. The two of them had bought those curtains together—they’d gone to the IKEA in Oslo at Brunnhilde’s suggestion, a trip that had involved learning how to use Uber. The curtains were ugly, but they’d been inexpensive, which had been the idea. It had been fun, actually. They hadn’t been back on Earth

very long at the time and Loki had only recently decided he was going to stay for good. He could no longer remember why he'd decided that the existing curtains needed to go, he only remembered thinking they were a terrible eyesore and a symbol of Thor's brokenness.

Anyway, they'd entered IKEA utterly unprepared for the experience, dutifully taking the piece of paper provided at the entrance, along with the stubby pencil, which had been dwarfed by Thor's hand. At first, they'd moved through the showroom mostly in silence. Loki had entered each of the perfectly laid out simulacra of stylish Nordic homes to study the curtains over the windows.

After the fourth room, he'd turned to find Thor sprawled on the sofa. There was a blanket that he believed was supposed to resemble the pelt of an animal, though it clearly was artificial. Zebra, he thought it was called. Thor pulled the blanket over himself and said, "What do you think? If we just stayed here, would anyone notice?"

Loki had stared at him, frozen, not sure how he was supposed to respond to this. Though their relationship was immeasurably better and closer than it had been, sometimes he was still cautious, full of trepidation that Thor would wake up one morning and want him gone. After all, the house that they were sharing in New Asgard wasn't large.

"I think it's possible that the staff might question the fact that two Asgardians had suddenly become a fixture in this, er..." He'd glanced around, looking for a name. Every product in the store had a prominently placed name on it. "This Djungelskog room."

His pronunciation had made Thor guffaw. "Shouldn't you be able to say the word properly?" Thor asked.

"*You* try it," Loki had shot back, though a smile had been twitching at his mouth. The zebra blanket was still draped over Thor.

Thor had waved a hand and said, "No, that's fine, let's go with whatever you said." He repeated Loki's mangled pronunciation and snorted. Loki couldn't help it, following suit, until both of them were giggling like children. A young couple had come through the room and stared at both of them, which had only made the whole thing funnier.

They'd gotten the curtains eventually, but they'd also spent hours in the store, spending far too much time finding the most impractical kitchen and bathroom designs and then discussing in the most serious tones they could muster how they would install them; suggesting increasingly absurd light fixtures, and finally, as the store was closing down, egging each other on to go into the children's play area. Thor had almost done it, but a teenage girl in her yellow vest had walked by and he'd stopped and raised a fist to thump it against the side of a tunnel, as though he was admiring the construction.

Loki blinked and focused on Thor, who was staring at him, clearly waiting for elaboration on what Loki had just said. The curtains, and his reminiscing about them, may have been a distraction. He drew in a deep breath and met Thor's eyes. "You're not saying anything."

Thor rested his hands on the back of the sofa and hesitated. "I'm not sure what to say."

Gesturing vaguely, Loki asked, "Don't you want to know if I said yes?"

His eyebrows going up, Thor said, "Considering you came home and got drunk—alone—before you passed out in the living room, I'm going to guess you didn't." Shaking his head, he added, "I hope you didn't say no, Loki."

Loki put his hand over his eyes. Why was July so *bright* in Norway? “I didn’t say no. I didn’t say anything, actually.”

When he removed his hand, Thor was staring at him, still looking unsure. “And...how did Stephen take that?”

“Er, I’m not sure.” Loki stared at the back of one of his hands, then picked at a hangnail. “I...ah... may have left before he could really...react to my lack of answer.”

Thor put his hand over his eyes and sighed, which Loki found rather offensive. As though his brother was some sort of Casanova? He thought he was using that word properly. The way Loki recalled it, Thor had needed plenty of assistance wooing Jane. And quite honestly, Loki hadn’t been all that impressed with the way he’d gone about it.

“Loki,” Thor said. “*Why?*”

“Why?” Loki repeated. It was a good question. He’d asked it of himself over and over as he’d downed most of the Contraxian whiskey last night. “Because I never thought he would *ask* me something like that! He’s the one always saying he doesn’t need to get married, that it doesn’t mean anything, that there’s no point.”

There was an expression on Thor’s face that looked like some kind of combination of exasperation, amusement, and resignation. “So he surprised you and you just left? Without saying anything?”

Loki glanced at his phone. Stephen hadn’t texted back. “I didn’t know what to say,” he admitted.

“Well,” Thor said. “It’s kind of a yes or no question.”

“I know that,” Loki snapped, though it was without much rancor. Flopping back on the sofa and putting a hand to his forehead, he repeated, “I know.”

The sofa moved slightly as Thor leaned against it. “You know, not to be obvious, but you could have just told him that you needed time to think.”

At this, Loki raised his hand from his eyes and looked at Thor. “But I don’t need time to think,” Loki said. “That’s hardly the issue.”

“I’m confused,” Thor said.

Arching an eyebrow, Loki said, “So, as usual, then?” When Thor gave him a flat, unimpressed look, Loki shrugged, then sighed. “I don’t need time to think,” he said, “because *obviously* I want to marry Stephen. I would have married Stephen eight years ago.”

“You would have married him the minute you started dating?” Thor asked.

It would have been better for his image if he could have said *no* to this question, but the truth was...well, sentimental. He glanced down at his lap and interlaced his fingers. “Yes,” he said.

Thor nodded, like he’d always known this, but wanted to hear Loki say it. “So what’s the problem? Why didn’t you say yes?”

“Because,” Loki said. “It wouldn’t be right to just...accept a proposal.”

Thor didn’t say anything. Loki was fairly sure it was because he didn’t trust himself not to tell Loki he was an idiot. “Maybe I’m not following,” Thor said. “You want to marry your wizard.”

“Yes.”

“But it wouldn’t be right to accept a proposal.”

“Correct.”

“Then—” But realization flashed over Thor’s face. “Oh, no.”

Giving his brother a defensive look, Loki asked, “And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

There was a long-suffering expression on Thor’s face. “Loki, just go there and say ‘yes.’ Don’t do what you’re about to do.”

Loki checked his phone again. Still no text from Stephen. There was a distinct possibility he was angry, though his patience for what Brunnhilde referred to as Loki’s ‘bullshit’ had always seemed endless. “I can’t just say *yes*,” Loki replied. “I have to court him.” When Thor groaned, Loki said more loudly, “It wouldn’t be right if I didn’t.”

At that moment, Jane came padding down the stairs, thick socks on her feet and her short hair sticking up in the back. The hair was adorable, which Loki had been sure to tell her after she’d cut it a few weeks ago. He’d been hoping to get more of a rise out of her than he had. His sister-in-law didn’t usually take the bait, though. “Wouldn’t be right if you didn’t what?” she asked.

Before Loki could respond, Thor said, “Stephen proposed to him. He didn’t say anything because he wants to *court* Strange.”

“It’s tradition!” Loki said.

Jane stared at both of them, then said, “I’m not getting involved in this.” She came the rest of the way down the stairs, her hand on the intricately carved railing, and added, “At least not until I’ve had some coffee.”

Unfortunately, that meant she’d be back. And she’d take Thor’s side. Neither of them was exactly traditional when it came to Asgard, but Loki—and this was a continual surprise, even to him—was. No doubt some psychologist somewhere would tell him that because he was adopted, because he wasn’t technically, biologically Asgardian, that he clung all the harder to the traditions of the people whom he wanted to accept him. It didn’t matter that they’d accepted him long ago, long before he’d been able to accept his place among them—those traditions still mattered to him, even if they didn’t matter to Thor. And Jane, Valkyrie or no, had never made any claim to be Asgardian.

Thor was still looking at him in dismay. “Look, Loki, sometimes traditions die, and it’s not a bad thing that they did. We’re on Earth now. Stephen is human. And you don’t need to prove anything to anyone to wed him.”

“What if I need to prove something to myself?” Loki asked, his tone prickly.

With a sigh, Thor put a hand to the back of his neck and looked out the windows. “I don’t know what you think you have to prove to yourself, either. And you know Stephen would agree with me.”

This may have been true, but Loki certainly didn’t need to admit it. “I’m a Prince of New Asgard. I may not be able to provide a palace or money or a title, but I can do this, at least.”

From the kitchen door, Jane asked, “You don’t really think Stephen’s ever expected you to provide any of that, do you?”

The truth was no, he never had. Stephen had literally seen him fall on his face on the sidewalk outside the Sanctum, the only thing in his possession the Tesseract and the clothes he was wearing. Well, and technically, whatever was in his pocket dimension, but he'd never kept money stashed in there. It had never seemed necessary. The point was, Stephen Strange had never had any illusions about the state of Loki's finances or his claim to a nonexistent throne and the idea, frankly, had never even crossed Loki's mind.

"So what," Thor said. "You're going to go through the whole ridiculous thing? Aren't his parents dead? Who are you going to pay the *mundr* to?"

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it. Haughtily, he said, "I'll deal with that when I need to."

As Jane came into the room, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee, she asked, "Refresh my memory—what's the *mundr*, again?"

"It's the money that the groom brings to the marriage," Thor supplied.

"Oh." Jane pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows. "Well, I definitely didn't get that."

Thor grinned at her. "I *did* offer to let you keep Mjøl̥nir; that's pretty priceless."

Coming over to him, Jane stood her toes and kissed Thor's cheek. "Being the Mighty Thor was a temporary gig. I'll stick to being an astrophysicist and a Valkyrie."

Loki raised an eyebrow. "And you got rather a consolation prize in your current weapon of choice." Ravens̥ey, he meant—her sword, now that she was New Asgard's Valkyrie.

"That too." She pushed Loki's feet out of the way so she could sit down on the sofa with her coffee. "For what it's worth, I think it's kind of sweet you want to—what, court Stephen?"

With an *I-told-you-so* look at Thor, Loki said, "Thank you, Jane. That's exactly what I intend to do."

"But," she added, "I'm also pretty sure Stephen asked you sincerely, and the last thing he'd expect is for you to do..." Trepidation flickered across her face. "Whatever it is that Asgardians do to court."

"I thought you weren't getting involved?" Loki asked, tone abruptly souring.

With a shrug, she said, "Changed my mind. Anyway, the not-getting-involved ship probably sailed about thirty years ago."

Snorting, Loki said, "Fine. I can see I'll be going this one alone. You know, traditionally, the family *helps* with the courtship, but that's obviously a lost cause with the two of you."

Jane cleared her throat in what sounded suspiciously like a laugh, but when he glanced at her, she was straight-faced. "We'll help you." Shooting a look at Thor which still seemed to be a poorly disguised attempt to keep from laughing, she said, "Don't look like that, we will."

"You wouldn't be saying that if I'd courted you the way I was supposed to," Thor said. "You'd probably be texting Stephen and telling him to run for the hills."

Glowering, Loki said, "I'm regretting all the times over the years that I've saved your life."

Thor chuckled, but then he ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. "Seriously, brother—

you have a good man who loves you. Resurrecting all these traditions says nothing.”

“It does to me,” Loki said. When Thor looked at him, Loki glanced away. The concept of worthiness had lost much of its meaning to Loki years ago. The things he’d struggled for so long to be worthy of—they were illusions in the end, or simply not the things that really mattered. And it had taken him far, far too long to realize what the things that really mattered were.

But being worthy of Stephen’s love—that *was* important. He wasn’t an idiot. He understood that Stephen didn’t require an Asgardian courting. But Loki needed to do this for himself, if for no one else.

Thor put a hand to Loki’s shoulder and squeezed, then clapped him on the back. “Alright. If it makes you happy, then I’ll do everything I can.” At this, he paused and looked at Loki, a softness in his eyes. “Seeing you happy, it’s…”

Loki raised his eyebrows and smiled slightly, knowing Thor wouldn’t finish the sentence. There was no need, really. Both of them knew now, without saying it out loud, that the other’s happiness was paramount. They’d lost each other enough. Loki no longer cared to pretend that his brother wasn’t the most important person in his life. It was a good thing Jane thought it was sweet, considering the three of them lived under one roof together. And Stephen had always understood.

Anyway, Loki’s love for Stephen was obviously different. He supposed there were those who thought it was odd—Loki retained his residence in New Asgard, continuing to call it home, still living with his brother and sister-in-law, when anyone else would have moved in with his lover of eight years. But it worked for them. Stephen couldn’t leave the Sanctum, and after years of bitterly dismissing New Asgard, Loki found that he loved it with a fierceness that precluded moving away.

Besides, they both had sling rings. Even on nights they hadn’t planned to spend together, they could—and frequently did—open a portal to the other’s bedroom and climb into bed. Loki was perennially sleep deprived, since he’d made a habit of staying awake until he knew Stephen was coming or not. Oh well. He’d been sleep deprived long before Stephen had come on the scene, and waiting to feel warm, sure hands slide under his clothes and pull him close was a far nicer reason to lose sleep.

He surreptitiously checked his phone again. Still no text. They didn’t fight often, not real fights, but Loki supposed being proposed to and then departing without any kind of answer was grounds for an argument.

There was still Thor’s dangling sentence to respond to. Loki reached up and clasped a hand around his brother’s arm. It was a gesture that said *I know* without having to actually say the words. Both of them were probably capable of it, these days. They had come a long way from a prank gone wrong and a ruined coronation.

Thor patted Loki on the back again, then withdrew his arm. “So,” he said. “How can we help?”

Glancing at his phone again, Loki smiled slightly. “I’ll get back to you,” he said. “To be honest, at the moment, I think I need a shower.”

“Yes,” Thor said. “You’re not wrong about that.” When Loki shot him a disgruntled look, Thor said, “I meant because you have blood all over yourself! It’s on your face! You can’t possibly not have realized?”

Actually, he hadn’t, but Loki said, “Of course I realized.” He heaved himself off the sofa, which took far more effort than he would have liked, and climbed the stairs, still holding his phone tightly

in his hand. He wasn't too proud to text Stephen again, but he would have liked a response before it came to that.

He stopped at the top of the stairs and turned the phone over in his hands to stare at the blank screen. Just then, it buzzed and lit up, Stephen's message displaying on the screen. Was he going to say anything about what had happened last night?

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

You sure?

Loki furrowed his brow. Was he sure about what? Oh, right. He'd said he was fine.

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

Yes

He chewed at his lip, then, against his better judgement, added,

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

Sorry for leaving so quickly. Did you get the converter to Shuri?

Yeah. She says thanks

Good

His heart was thudding and with effort, he took a deep breath, trying to slow it. Stephen was typing, rather a long message if the time it was taking was any indication. Then, he stopped. Loki leaned a shoulder against the wall and waited.

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

I love you

Loki's heart compressed and expanded so fast that it hurt. This was clearly not the extent of what Stephen had wanted to say, but it was exactly what Loki wanted to hear. He was typing back before he'd even thought about it.

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

I love you too

You don't doubt that, do you?

I love you very much

I've never doubted it for a second

But

When you come over on Friday you can prove it to me if you want

The series of emojis that followed made Loki smile crookedly.

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

That won't be much of a hardship

He was tempted to ask if Stephen was busy at the current moment, because he wouldn't mind proving it now. Going without their usual post-battle sex had been another reason to get drunk as quickly as possible last night. But he was still hungover and apparently covered in blood—not exactly at his most desirable. Anyway, it was three in the morning in New York.

(Sparkles)Stephen(Sparkles)

Get some sleep. Text me later

Friday would be fine. On Friday, he'd begin to prove his love for Stephen Strange. Er, and not just by letting Stephen have his way with him in bed. On Friday, Loki would begin courting Stephen. At the end of that courtship, he was confident that his proposal of marriage would be accepted.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Hope you're enjoying the fic so far 😊 Thank you so much for reading!
I love, love, love hearing what people think, so if you'd like, drop me a comment!
Kudos are also greatly appreciated!

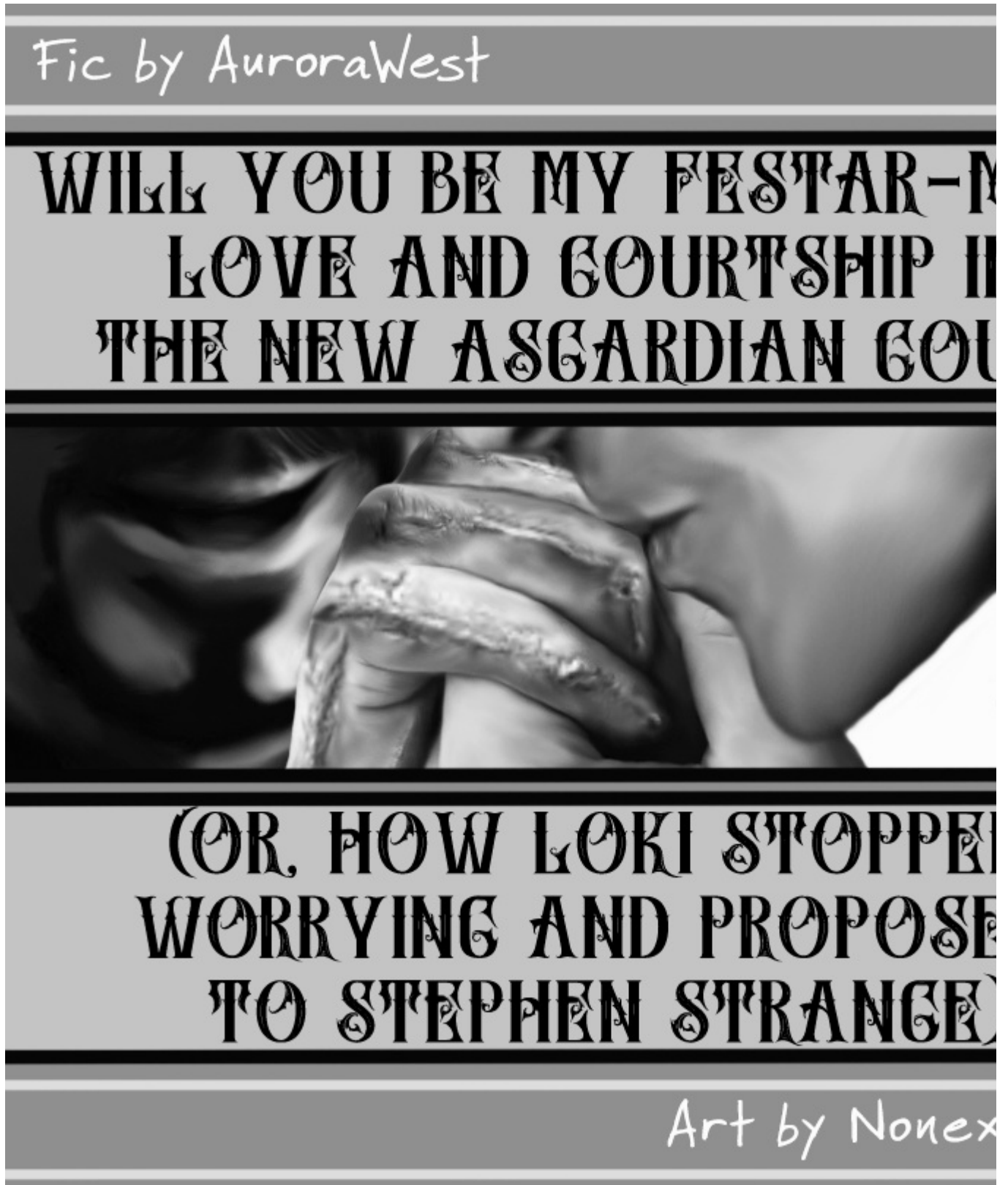
Feel free to come hang out with me on [tumblr](#), too! It's pretty much all Loki all the time.

Courting Cake

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The cake was first.

Obviously the cake was first. There were several different schools of thought when it came to an Asgardian courtship, with different symbolic gestures and gifts. Some courtships were legendary on Asgard for their sheer length of time and the number of ways the prospective spouse—the fester-man—had found to show their love and devotion. The sagas had it that Frithiof and Ingeborg had spent a century going back and forth, Frithiof finding feat after feat to prove his suitability as a husband.

Loki certainly didn't need to spend a century. In fact, Loki didn't *have* a century. He knew very well how long humans lived, and that meant, by the most optimistic count, that he had around forty years left with Stephen. So a century spent proving his love was out of the question. He'd been thinking more on the order of a month. Maybe two. Some of the customs he'd chosen were a bit labor intensive.

Anyway, the cake was the one that all the sagas and legends began with, and he remembered his mother once telling him a story of Odin delivering her the same cake when he'd been courting her. The idea had, honestly, been ridiculous. Loki had been old enough that the idea of romance, and his parents' in particular, hadn't been *entirely* horrifying, but he still had lacked the imagination to visualize a young Odin courting Frigga.

"People thought your father had odd tastes," Frigga had said.

"Really?" Loki had asked doubtfully. He'd reached an age where he was beginning to question many of the decisions his father made. Marrying Frigga wouldn't have been one of them.

With a smile, a bit too private, Loki had thought, for a conversation with one of her sons, Frigga had said, "My upbringing didn't make me a popular choice. I believe your grandfather was quite opposed to the match when your father first broached the subject."

Which had become ironic several centuries later when Thor had brought Jane Foster back to Asgard and Odin had made his opinion of the romance clear. Loki could only imagine what he'd think of Stephen. And he had, unfortunately—imagined it, that was. Though Loki had come to terms with his father over the years, he was still quite sure that Odin wouldn't look kindly on both of his sons ending up with humans, and he especially didn't think Odin would have appreciated Loki ending up with another magic user.

He wished he could ask his mother what the cake had been like. In theory, he knew. The hopeful suitor would journey to each corner of Asgard collecting the ingredients. There was symbolism behind each one, deep, meaningful symbolism, reaching back eons, back to the beginning of Asgard, or perhaps even before.

Of course, Asgard was gone. So he couldn't actually get any of them.

The recipe he'd chosen to reproduce the traditional Asgardian Courting Cake was for something called eplekake—apple cake, in English. And that was appropriate, because this cake, the Asgardian variant, that was, the one that Loki had realized right before he'd begun baking was something he could never properly reproduce, used, as its main ingredient, the Golden Apples of Idunn.

If only he *could* get his hands on a Golden Apple, even just a tiny piece of one. It wouldn't take much to extend Stephen's life. Even a piece the size of a fingernail would give him several hundred more years.

Stephen would never forgive him if he did such a thing, of course. Anyway, it was a moot point. There were no Golden Apples anymore. Or if there were, they were hidden away in some rich Kree

or Xandarian's vault, most likely. *That* would be a quest worthy of the sagas—hunting down the last remaining Golden Apple of Idunn to prolong the life of his human lover; baking it into the Courting Cake along with honey from Ria, cinnamon from the bark of trees that grew along the rainy sides of Asgard's mountains, and plums dried in the Asgardian sun from sweet fruit ripened under starlight. Loki might even have used plums from the palace's own gardens, since the trees flowered there every spring.

Going to the MENY in Tønsberg wasn't quite the same level of quest, though Thor did his best to give the moment some gravity as he wheeled the shopping cart through the aisles, comparing Loki's love for Stephen to various long-lasting foodstuffs until Loki hissed at him to shut up. Thor looked too big for any human store, but he looked particularly ridiculous at the helm of the small handlekurvs that every Norwegian supermarket had. This wasn't helped by him exclaiming over every slightly novel thing in the shop, as though he'd been plucked off Asgard yesterday and set down on Earth instead of having lived here for the past twenty years. Normally, they shopped at a much smaller market closer to New Asgard which had a more limited selection, but it was hardly their first time seeing such rare delicacies as Oreos.

Few people gave them a second look as they strolled through the store. Asgardians were a common enough sight in Tønsberg and the residents had grown more or less inured even to the particularly famous ones. There were perks to this. When the tourists came through town and pulled their phones out to take photos and video of the Odinsons, a local would invariably tell them in crisp, clipped English to stop, that the people of New Asgard were not an attraction. There was a protectiveness that Loki had always found odd but gratifying.

"What about this one?" Thor asked, picking up an outrageously priced, and very small, bag of flour. They had already had an argument about the fact that they had perfectly good flour at home. Loki had informed him it wasn't good enough. "It's organic and unbleached. And it says it's made from 100% Norwegian wheat."

Loki took it from him. He'd need two bags; there was hardly enough here for one cake, and he wasn't convinced of his ability to get the recipe correct the first time. The cost made him cringe, but then again, this was important. There was no worthier place for whatever extra kroner he had to be spent that on the materials he needed to court Stephen properly.

Though flour, even expensive flour, was certain to be one of the lowest priced materials. "Yes, I'll get it," Loki said. Thor put two bags in the cart without needing to be told, setting them next to the bag of apples they'd chosen out of the fresh produce section of the store. Apples obviously weren't in season, which meant they'd either been shipped from afar, or they'd been sitting in a warehouse somewhere since the previous autumn. Loki hoped it was the former. They were expensive, too.

"We have cinnamon already," Thor said, squinting at their list, scrawled in Loki's messy handwriting.

"We're getting better cinnamon," Loki said. "That stuff was in the cupboard when I got here." *Got here* was the shorthand that they'd settled on over the years—shorthand for, a divergent timeline created by the Avengers had created a different Loki, who ultimately had gone to *The Statesman* and died in place of the Loki who was currently standing in a MENY baking aisle trying to decide which sustainably sourced cinnamon was best. Ultimately, Loki had ended up in 2023 at the New York Sanctum. It wasn't how Stephen and he had met, of course, but it was when their relationship had taken root. It was probably, if Loki was being honest, when he'd fallen in love with Stephen, though you could have killed him before he'd admitted that at the time. Or for many years afterwards, actually.

It was probably a bit of an exaggeration that the cinnamon in the cupboard at home predated Loki's unlikely survival and reappearance. But it wasn't *fresh* and that meant it wasn't suitable.

One of the jars he was looking at was more expensive. In the absence of any other distinguishing criteria, it was the best he had. He selected all the other spices the same way, including a single, wrinkled vanilla bean in a plastic tube.

"It will be delicious, Loki," Thor said on their way through the dairy section, where they picked out butter and eggs. "He'll be ready to marry you after one bite."

"Technically, he's ready to marry me right now," Loki said. "Or at least, he was."

Glancing at him, Thor said, "I'm sure he won't hold it against you that you left without answering him. He's used to you by now."

"Thanks," Loki said sourly.

Thor laughed. "It's a good thing. You both know each other well. He's well aware of your temperament and isn't likely to balk."

Loki arched an eyebrow. "Were you trying to make this better? If you were, I have to tell you, you've succeeded only in opening your mouth and inserting your foot even further inside."

They arrived at the checkout and Thor laughed again. "I could say the same for him, you know. *I* wouldn't want to date him."

"Yes, he can be difficult," Loki said fondly. It was hard not to feel a certain amount of pride that they were so good at handling each other's quirks and, well, less pleasant qualities. Loki knew he was challenging. So was Stephen—with his cockiness, his bone-dry delivery of almost everything, and his insufferable tendency to never miss an opportunity to remind anyone he had a photographic memory. He was almost always the smartest person in the room, and he preferred if everyone knew it. Though, time had mellowed this a bit. Sometimes he even allowed the newest crop of geniuses/Avengers to think they were smarter.

They weren't, of course. Though Loki tried not to tell him too often—his ego was inflated enough—Loki had never met anyone as intelligent as Stephen Strange.

Clearing his throat, Thor said, "Loki, it's our turn."

With a start, Loki realized he'd been staring into space dreamily. As the cashier, an older woman, scanned their items through, she said, "You must be making eplekake!" When Loki nodded, she beamed. Probably thought he was going native.

Then again, he was knee-deep in plans to propose marriage to a human, so she wasn't exactly wrong.

The total was horrifying; more than he'd ever paid for such a small amount of food, but pay for it he did, and then Thor and he carried the bags outside. Technically, neither of them needed any kind of ground transportation, as Thor had Mjølfnir and Loki had his sling ring, but the Odinson household had nevertheless acquired a car. They used it for this type of errand. Loki actually liked driving, even if the ancient Tesla wasn't exactly an Asgardian skiff or a spaceship. They still had their old spaceship, too, but it wasn't really necessary to cover such a short distance. Besides, it was hard to park.

"Do you want help with the cake?" Thor asked as they headed home.

“I’m perfectly capable of baking a cake,” Loki said. Thor wrinkled his nose, as though this was questionable. In retribution, Loki drove faster than necessary to get home, taking the turns on the narrow roads too fast, though he didn’t get any reaction from Thor.

It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate the offer, though he could have done without the implied slight on his own abilities. It was just—for this part, the cake itself, he wanted it to be his and no one else’s. Thor would take over if he helped. He was a better baker, for one thing, but more importantly, he was *Thor*. Not taking charge was a struggle for him.

No, Loki wanted to do this on his own, so that when he presented it to Stephen, he could say, “Please accept this token; cinnamon, for the friendship between us; honey, for the sweetness of our union; dried plums, for perseverance through life’s adversity; the fruit of Idunn, for my undying love.”

For heaven’s sake. There wasn’t a chance he’d be able to get all that out without laughing. Talk about sentimental.

Fine. He’d decide on different words, but the sentiment would be the same. Just...not...*so* much sentiment. It was the perfect thing to keep him occupied while he baked.

Loki stared at the oven, watching the timer count down with his arms crossed over his chest. He could feel a smear of flour on his face, but after he’d put the cake in the oven, he’d found himself unable to budge from the kitchen while it baked.

It smelled...fine. Like a cake. Loki didn’t actually like cakes that much; at least, not this kind, with the different fruits making the texture uneven. Years ago, before Stephen and he had gotten involved, the two of them had run into each other in London. They’d ended up drinking, then eating, then walking, and though at the time, Loki had been busy repeating to himself that he wasn’t interested in Strange, not in the slightest, not even as a friend, he had found excuse after excuse not to leave.

They had ended up in front of an unassuming bakery, where Stephen had said, “What do you say? We’ve done drinks, we’ve done dinner—how about dessert?”

And though Loki had known he should walk away, say no, extricate himself from the situation, part of him, a tiny, insistent part of him, had already recognized that he was in too deep. They had gone inside and ordered a massive piece of cake with seven layers, each one a different color of the rainbow, which they had shared. Loki had been fully aware of how it looked, even before a well meaning but profoundly annoying—and possibly drunk—young woman in an I ♥ LONDON shirt had grabbed his arm and said, “You two are the *cutest* couple.”

At the time, he’d considered storming off and leaving Stephen to finish the stupid piece of cake by himself. But it had been good, and in those days he’d been doing his best to Not Make a Scene. And...he’d been enjoying the company more than he’d wanted to admit.

So instead, he’d done the opposite of what he’d been inclined to do, and said, the barest hint of a sneer in his voice, which he knew she wouldn’t catch, “Thank you. It’s our anniversary.”

She’d put a hand over her heart, said, “You’re *so* cute,” and walked away.

When he’d turned back around, it was to a crooked, amused smile on Stephen’s face. “Thank you for the *lovely* anniversary, darling,” Stephen had said, sounding like this was the wittiest repartee anyone could possibly come up with.

“Shut up.”

“So, let me ask you this—do you *want* every tabloid on the planet reporting that Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme, and Loki Odinson, Prince of New Asgard, are dating?”

At this, Loki had paled and immediately cast a memory spell over everyone in the place, plus anyone within a twenty foot radius of the door, just in case. The thought had been appalling. He hadn’t wanted to imagine it—*him*, romantically involved with *Strange*? Revolting.

Of course, the thought had slipped into his head as Thor and he flew home to New Asgard through the night hours. Thor had asked him, “What are you smiling about?”

Loki hadn’t even known he was smiling; the thought he’d been having was: *Wouldn’t it be a disaster if I let Stephen Strange hold my hand?* So obviously he’d scowled, snapped, “Nothing,” and stomped off somewhere that Thor couldn’t see him.

Anyway, the point was, Loki didn’t like cake very much, but he was partial to that rainbow layer cake.

The timer beeped and he took a deep breath and opened the oven. This was the second version of this cake he’d made. The first had...not gone well. Jane had walked into the kitchen, turned around, and walked right out. He’d wished he could shout after her that it wasn’t that bad, but it was, and he knew it. And he also knew he should have made a second attempt yesterday, but he’d been frustrated and annoyed.

So it was Friday now. He was supposed to be at the Sanctum within half an hour. This thing had better be done, and it had better have turned out right this time. Or at least edible. Edible would be acceptable.

The oven let out a warm sigh of air as Loki reached in and pulled out the cake. It looked far more successful than his first attempt. Whether or not it would *taste* right was another issue.

It had to cool enough for him to put it in a box to transport. By the time that was done, he was already late. At least it had given him time to wipe the flour off his face. There had been some in his hair, too. He vanished the box to his pocket dimension, pulled out his sling ring, and fitted it onto his fingers.

The kitchen was still a bit of a mess, which neither Thor nor Jane would thank him for, but he’d cleaned up as much as he had time to clean. Before either of them came in, he opened a portal straight into the Sanctum’s library.

The portal spun shut behind him as he stepped through. The library was empty. Surprising. It was by far Stephen’s favorite room in the house, especially in the summer, when light streamed through the windows and brightened it. It was Loki’s favorite room, too, filled with books from not just Earth, but all over the multiverse. He’d found volumes inside that his Allspeak could do nothing with, scrolls that appeared to be entirely blank unless looked at under the right lighting or while the correct constellation was in the sky. He could spend days in that library doing nothing but paging through all that accumulated knowledge.

“Hey,” a voice said from behind him. Loki turned to find Stephen standing there, a small smile on his face. “You’re normally more punctual,” Stephen said.

His tone was teasing, but Loki still wrinkled his nose in regret. “Yes,” he said. “I’m sorry. I got... caught up with something.”

If Stephen noticed any caginess, he didn't react. "I'm kidding," he said. "Come here."

Loki smiled faintly and affectionately as Stephen disregarded his own request and closed the distance between them himself, but Loki was the one who reached for him, sliding his hands over either side of Stephen's face and leaning down to kiss him.

There had been a fear, he had to admit, now that they were standing there kissing each other, that Stephen would be upset about the marriage proposal. Thor's words had a certain merit to them—that perhaps Loki should have simply said he needed time to think, rather than just...leaving. He supposed he still could. He could acknowledge that it had happened, apologize to Stephen for running without answering, and tell him that he hadn't meant to ignore him; that he knew it was serious, that he was considering it.

Or...he could do things his way, and Stephen would be his betrothed in a month's time, anyway.

Stephen held onto him more tightly than seemed normal, his fingers digging into Loki's back. His kiss was as slow and sure as ever, though, unhurried, like they had all the time in the world. Somehow, he always made Loki feel that they did, even though it wasn't the case.

When Stephen kissed him like that, honestly, all he wanted to do for the rest of his life was kiss him back.

Gods. When had he turned so sentimental and soppy? He was soft. This planet had turned him soft.

It was hard to find it in himself to care.

Eventually, they separated. Stephen ran a hand down Loki's arm, but just before letting Loki's fingers slide through his, he held on instead, hooking their hands together. There was a penetrating look in his eyes. More penetrating than usual, that was. Loki tried not to shift uncomfortably. Obviously, the marriage proposal had not been forgotten. Well, of course not. Stephen forgot nothing. It was simultaneously one of his best and worst qualities. It was clear that he was trying to peer through Loki's expression for some clue as to what he was thinking. Considering Loki had never been able to maintain much of a mask around Stephen, this probably wouldn't be difficult for him.

There was no reason for a mask. If Stephen wanted to look, there wasn't anything to find. Loki loved him. Full stop.

"So what do you want to do?" Stephen asked, his scrutiny abruptly evaporating. "It's a nice day. Not too hot. We could go for a walk." He shot Loki a crooked smile. "You could wear a t-shirt."

"I don't like t-shirts," Loki said.

"Yeah, but you look great in them," Stephen replied, raising his eyebrows.

With a snort, Loki twirled his fingers. Green shimmered over his body from head to toe, and rather than a sweater and leather pants, he was now wearing a black t-shirt and black jeans.

"Hot," Stephen said.

"I refuse to wear shorts."

With a chuckle, Stephen said, "You know what I meant."

A smile flickering across his face, Loki asked, "Do I?" As Stephen's gaze lingered on Loki's upper

arms, he added, “If you’re done ogling me, yes, I’d like to go for a walk.”

Stephen laughed and squeezed Loki’s hand. “Okay, okay. Sorry.” There was a whoosh in Loki’s ears and the two of them were suddenly standing outside on the front stoop, still hand in hand. The woman who lived next door was walking by and lifted her hand in a wave, unfazed by this. “Hi, Mrs. Feldstein,” Stephen said.

“Beautiful evening,” she said. “Are you bringing Loki to Music in the Park?”

Turning his head to look at Stephen, Loki said pointedly, “You told me it was canceled this week.”

Stephen looked vaguely defeated. So. Clearly not a simple oversight, but rather a malicious attempt to keep them from attending. “Yeah,” he said. “Just heading there now, I guess.”

Mrs. Feldstein smiled and said, “I think it’s nice you like our music so much, Loki, when it must be awfully different that what you’re used to. Did you go to many concerts on Asgard?”

Twenty-five years ago, it would have been unthinkable for Loki to be asked this question. Ten years ago, it would have merely flustered him. “Not really,” he replied. “Asgard didn’t have what you might call...a robust arts program.”

What a difference twenty-five years made. In 2012, he could hardly have expected the people of Earth to ask him if he’d enjoyed the orchestra on his home planet. Now, in 2038, it didn’t even seem all that odd.

Well, to be honest, it would probably always seem a *bit* odd. Stepping out of a house in the Village with his human lover, who also happened to be the Sorcerer Supreme, at his side and chatting with a neighbor about the weather and free community music performances was always going to be *odd*. He’d gotten accustomed to the people of Tønsberg knowing him. New York had always seemed like it would be far more of a stretch. Then again, Stephen’s neighbors were used to a sorcerer living next door—so what if an alien prince got added to the mix?

She shifted her tote bag from one hand to another. There were carrot greens poking out from the top of it. Loki found himself vaguely disappointed that they’d missed the farmer’s market, and then, far more than vaguely derisive about the fact that this thought had crossed his mind at all. But what did he expect from himself? If he wasn’t going to keep himself separate from humans and their ways, which he clearly wasn’t, then he had to live with the embarrassing consequences.

“Well, I’m biased, I guess, but you can’t find music and theater anywhere else like you can in New York.” Looking between the two of them, she said, “It seems like we’ve been seeing a lot of you around lately, Loki...are you two married yet?”

Immediately, Loki felt himself stiffen, a reaction Stephen was sure to catch. But then again, Stephen had also stilled. “Not since last time you asked,” Stephen said, sounding breezy and as though he didn’t care in the slightest, as though three days ago he hadn’t asked Loki to marry him.

Shaking her head, she said, “You should get married. Move in together. You’re such a nice couple, and you’re not getting any younger. Go down to city hall and get the license!”

With a chuckle, Stephen said, “You’ll be the first to know if it’s happening.”

“I hope you’ll tell your families before me,” she said. There was a smile on her face, and Stephen shrugged in acknowledgement of this point before Mrs. Feldstein continued on her way.

At least the Music in the Park betrayal meant that they didn’t have to acknowledge the other part of

the neighborly interaction. “So,” Loki said. “Music in the Park is *canceled*. Low attendance, you told me? Another event in the East Village drawing attendees away?”

Rolling his shoulders back and giving Loki a long-suffering look, Stephen said, “It’s Haydn.”

“And?”

“I hate Haydn.”

When Loki arched an eyebrow, Stephen sighed and lamented, “And Mrs. Feldstein just called us a nice couple. She has no idea. My boyfriend is going to force me to listen to two hours of *Haydn*.”

“Don’t call me your boyfriend.”

Saying this was completely instinctive and without rancor—he hated being referred to as Stephen’s ‘boyfriend,’ but he’d been hearing it for eight years. This exchange was as old as their relationship, a well-worn bit of banter that, if Loki were honest, he’d probably miss if Stephen actually listened to him.

But saying it now was a mistake. It provided far too large an opening for a response that Loki didn’t want—an opening so massive you could sail a spaceship through it, up to and including a ship the size of *The Statesman*. The obvious reply to *Don’t call me your boyfriend* was clearly, *I’d like to be able to call you my fiancé, but you left without saying anything*.

Loki cleared his throat. “We don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

Smiling and rolling his eyes, Stephen said, “It’s fine. I’ll suffer through it. But now you owe me for *two* things.”

“Oh, I’ll gladly trade sexual favors for the arts,” Loki said with a sly smile.

“I didn’t say it had to be a sexual favor, but I’m not going to complain if it is.”

Loki shook his head and sighed. “And Mrs. Feldstein *just* called us a nice couple...here you are, Stephen, demanding depraved sexual acts before we can attend a cultural event...”

This made Stephen laugh. “Again, ‘depraved sexual acts;’ those are your words, not mine.”

Tugging at his hand until Stephen followed him down the front stoop to the sidewalk, Loki smiled. Hopefully that had been distraction enough from the marriage conversation. It had almost been a bit too much, ahem, *distraction* for Loki, but the slight pressure between his legs was abating. If there were any slow moments during the Haydn concert in the park, he could probably come up with one or two depraved sexual acts to occupy them once they got home...

It was a few steps before Loki realized he was still holding Stephen’s hand. Abruptly, he dropped it. They didn’t do that. Not in public. Partly, it was because Loki didn’t want to invite tabloid attention, but mostly it was because he wasn’t a public displays of affection type of person. The tabloids *had* had a field day when it had gotten out that they were romantically involved, though the two of them had managed to hide it for a couple years. The things that had been said about Loki were the same nasty fare he’d long lived with, but the slander against Stephen had been cruel and still made Loki’s blood boil.

Stephen had dryly referred to him as his ‘knight in shining armor’ one of the times that Loki had threatened to kill the people responsible for writing the tabloid pieces—as in, “You know I’m the Sorcerer Supreme, right? I don’t need a knight in shining armor.” But Loki had liked it anyway. It

wasn't often that he got to save the day.

Though, murdering everyone at the Daily Mail responsible for writing internet articles about his love life probably didn't count as 'saving the day.'

"You don't have to do that," Stephen said as they walked. When Loki looked him questioningly, he added, "Refuse to touch me in public."

"I don't like people staring," Loki said.

As they reached the corner, Stephen rolled his eyes. "People are already staring. Hold my hand for once, Odinson."

He had a point. The two of them were striking together. Even if they weren't recognized, they were both tall, both handsome. Stephen radiated magnetism; Loki knew he himself could command a space if he wanted to. If Stephen would wear something besides old t-shirts and jeans, there would probably be even more staring. Loki understood that for a man his age, Stephen was still in very good shape.

That was something that had come to Loki's attention recently, though. He could see people looking between them occasionally, wondering what the relationship was. Loki now looked twenty years younger than Stephen, though he was, of course, more than a thousand years older. This apparent age difference was only going to become more pronounced as Stephen continued to age. If only just one of Idunn's golden apples existed somewhere in the universe. If only the cake he'd baked wasn't made with something called a Honeycrisp apple, which had tasted good, but which Loki doubted bestowed any kind of long life.

The walk signal lit up, but neither of them moved. Loki's fingers tingled at the closeness of Stephen's hand. Speaking of the cake. Should he give it to Stephen right here? Now? On the corner of Sullivan and W 3rd?

An even madder thought occurred to him. What if he just accepted the marriage proposal?

But the moment passed. Obviously, he wasn't going to do either one of those things. As they crossed the street, Loki reached for Stephen's hand and took it, twining their fingers together. Stephen squeezed his hand and smiled at him.

They reached the park soon, falling in with the crowd of people there for the concert, and chose a spot on the grass at the back of the park, where they could lean against a tree and have fewer eyes on them. The New York City Chamber Orchestra was already set up on stage and tuning their instruments. Though Loki nearly pulled his hand away, at the last second, he decided against it. So they kept holding hands, Stephen's thumb rubbing small circles into Loki's wrist in time with the music. Golden light lit the Arch, growing richer, then fainter, and finally fading away into long shadows as the sun set and evening fell. At one point, Loki leaned over and murmured to Stephen, "Do you still hate Haydn?"

"Lifelong grudge," Stephen whispered back. "I had to play Sonata Number 7 in C for a recital one year and I *hated* it. My teacher kept smacking my fingers; said my 'touch' wasn't light enough."

"Mm. Well." Loki traced a finger over one of Stephen's scars. "I think you showed them."

"Not Haydn though. I still had to play the damn piece."

Loki chuckled. The people in front of them turned around and glared and Loki smirked at them. Then—and he only did it because it was dark—he leaned forward and kissed Stephen quickly.

When the concert ended, the two of them remained seated against the tree by unspoken agreement. Stephen had been right about the weather—it *was* a nice night, which, in Loki’s experience, was increasingly unusual for July in New York City. But there was hardly any humidity in the air, and that made it comfortable to simply sit and watch as people milled around, talking in groups, before slowly filtering out of Washington Square Park.

This was a good time for the cake, not standing on a street corner waiting to cross an intersection. They weren’t completely alone, but there weren’t many people in the park. Straightening up, he said, “I have something for you.”

Stephen looked intrigued and slightly confused. “Yeah?”

Holding his hands out, the box appeared with a shimmer of green. “Here,” he said. When Stephen hesitated, he held it out further and added, “Open it.”

“Is this a prank?” Stephen asked suspiciously.

Loki pursed his lips and gave him a flat look. “It would be a poor prank.”

“Depends what’s in the box.”

But when Loki just raised his eyebrows, Stephen took the box, seeming surprised by the weight. Yes, the cake was...dense. Loki was certain it wasn’t supposed to be that dense—the actual Asgardian version—but he didn’t really know for sure. Obviously, he hadn’t been making many Courting Cakes on Asgard. Or receiving them, for that matter.

Though he struggled a little because of his hands, Stephen got the box open. That struggle was the reason Loki hadn’t bothered tying or taping it shut. Both would have made it almost impossible for Stephen to open it on his own, at least without using magic, and he didn’t like needing to rely on the dexterity—pity, he would say—of others.

When Stephen opened the top and peered inside, Loki held his breath. Stephen looked...confused. “What is it?” he asked, glancing up at Loki.

“A cake,” Loki replied, fixing a smile on his face. It felt false. It probably didn’t look as bad as it felt, but...still. Stephen’s gaze flicked to it, then back to Loki’s eyes.

“What’s the occasion?” Stephen asked. Did he still think this was a prank?

“Er.” He hadn’t expected this question, which had been stupid. On Asgard, anyone would recognize a Courting Cake. Though, to be honest, they perhaps wouldn’t recognize *this* as a Courting Cake. As Loki looked at it, he could see that the top was sagging in the middle. It definitely wasn’t supposed to do that.

Could he say what it was for? Was that allowed? It couldn’t be. Because if Stephen didn’t know what it was and Loki told him what it was, he’d simply ask why they couldn’t decide to get married right now, since both of them had demonstrated their desire for such a thing. And that would negate all the work he’d put into this already.

“I just...” he began, then shrugged. “I just thought I’d make something for you.”

Stephen held it up and smelled it, then coughed. “It’s cinnamon-y,” he said, his eyes watering.

Shit. Had he used too much cinnamon?

Producing a couple plates, plus utensils, from his pocket dimension, Loki said, “I thought we could eat it now.”

Rather, they *had* to eat it now. The Courting Cake had to be eaten once given. If it wasn’t, that portended ill things for a couple. If it went *stale*, even worse. Loki was hoping that sitting through Haydn with no dinner would mean Stephen was hungry, because the cake was...not *small*, precisely. The weight of it also implied a density that might be...problematic.

Stephen laughed, but when Loki held out a plate for him, he stopped and said, “Oh. You’re serious.”

Loki’s brow furrowed. “Yes.”

Taking the plate, Stephen asked, “Don’t you want dinner or something?”

“Just this,” Loki said, hearing an annoyingly chirpy note in his own voice. Nerves. He was actually *nervous*. For heaven’s sake. He had known this man for fifteen years. This was hardly the maddest thing Loki had presented him with. And yet, Stephen was looking at him as though it might be.

Before Stephen had the chance to argue, Loki cut a piece—a generous piece; the fewer times he had to pass a slice over, the lower the likelihood that Stephen would refuse. Ideally, they would each eat half. Loki was prepared to eat as much of it as he had to if Stephen demurred before it was gone.

Stephen took a fork and popped a piece of the cake into his mouth, and it was about at that point that Loki realized he absolutely couldn’t watch the expressions cycling over his face. Hastily, Loki took a bite of the cake too.

It wasn’t very good.

It wasn’t *terrible*. Loki didn’t think he was going to poison either of them. But it wasn’t something he’d choose to eat more than a bite of. It seemed to suck his mouth dry of all saliva. Whatever he’d done—overcooked it, added too much of...something, it absorbed every bit of moisture it came into contact with, making it difficult to swallow. The first bite got stuck halfway down his throat.

Stephen looked pained, but he gamely continued eating. He was taking substantially smaller portions, Loki noticed. Smart. Good strategy. Loki was going to need that, because there was no way he’d be able to get Stephen to eat half this cake. However much he could cajole him into consuming would be a victory, and Loki was absolutely not above guilt-tripping him into doing it.

“It’s good,” Stephen said.

The temptation to call him out on this lie was almost overpowering, but it wasn’t in Loki’s interest to do so. Stephen choked down another mouthful and put his fork down. He hadn’t finished yet. Great. Wonderful. Marvelous. Loki’s eyes flicked to what remained in the box. More than half of the cake was still sitting there innocuously.

Loki shoveled too much into his mouth, practically choked as he swallowed it, then coughed, “Aren’t you going to finish?”

“Uh.” Glancing down at the cake, Stephen said, “You know, I think I’m full.”

Fine. Guilt it was. Loki drew his eyebrows together, one raised ever-so-slightly above the other, and widened his eyes. Looking down at the cake, he wrinkled his nose and said sadly, “It’s not very good. I was trying to reproduce an Asgardian recipe...foolish, I suppose. Why bother, when I

don't have access to Asgardian ingredients?"

He flicked his eyes up surreptitiously to watch Stephen's reaction. The allusion to Asgard being gone had felt a bit overboard, but Stephen picked his fork up again and poked at the cake before grimacing quickly and putting it in his mouth. Subtlety was better, but sometimes blatant pathos was called for. Loki could wield it as bluntly as Thor used his hammer.

When Stephen's plate was empty, Loki asked, "Do you want more?"

Stephen glanced around, like he was hoping for some reason to say they needed to go. None presented itself. His gaze turned to Loki, who allowed his brow to furrow a little more. If he wasn't careful, he was going to oversell this. But he needed Stephen to eat this cake. It may not have been *good*, but it was important. Now that he was thinking about it, he couldn't recall anyone ever saying that Courting Cake was good. Perhaps he hadn't done anything wrong at all! Perhaps this was exactly what it was supposed to taste like.

Something flickered through Stephen's eyes. Suspicion? He shifted closer to Loki and ran a hand across his thigh. Leaning in, he said, "Why don't we go home—"

"I'm still hungry," Loki said quickly, cutting himself far too big of a piece and dumping it on his plate. Obviously he'd rather go home and do what Stephen was suggesting, but this cake had to be eaten.

Stephen's jaw twitched. There was a silence. If Loki weren't balancing a plate, the cake, and his utensils, he'd have been twisting his fingers together. But then, Stephen smiled and nodded once. If the smile was just a bit forced, Loki pretended not to see. "Yeah, sure," Stephen said. "I'll have a little more."

Loki gave him most of what was left of the cake.

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, a few research notes:

Haydn's [Sonata No 7 in C Major](#).

I based the Asgardian courting cake tradition *very* loosely on the [Lancashire Courting Cake](#).

Eplekake is, in fact, a Norwegian apple cake. I haven't actually made one (though I feel like I probably should, just in honor of this), but the recipe that I looked at while I wrote this chapter is [here](#).

Thank you to everyone following Loki's courtship misadventures! If you feel so inclined, I would love to know what you think so far.

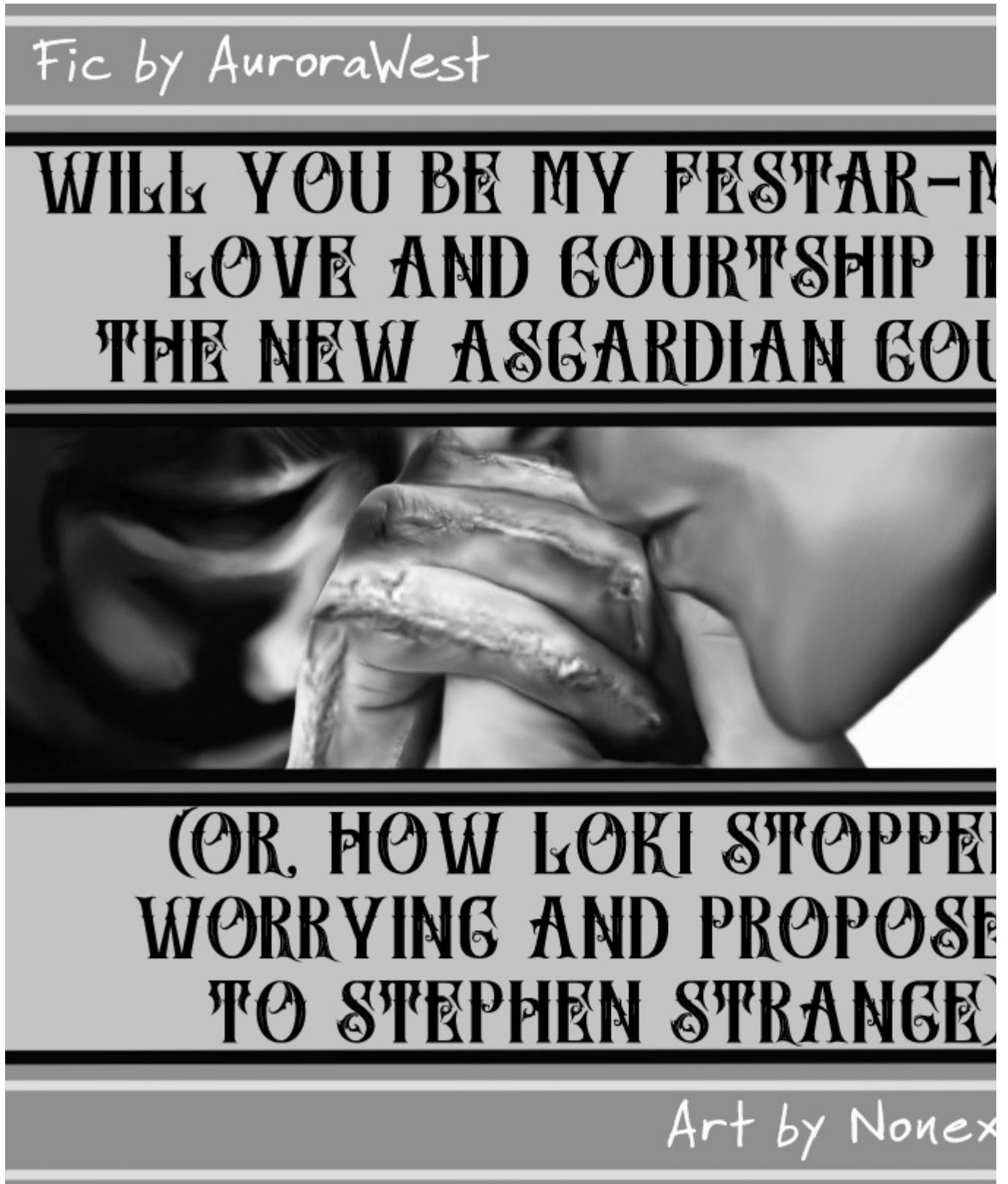
You should also come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! I like to talk about Loki.

Mundr

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The cake was clearly going to require sleeping off.

So much for the depraved sexual acts. There *was* some moaning when they got back to the Sanctum, but it was accompanied by Stephen clutching his stomach and looking miserable as he laid on their bed. Loki didn't feel particularly great either, but he was able to remain on his feet as he stood over Stephen and asked, "Do you want me to get you something?"

There was a silence, and then, "No."

Shifting his weight to his other foot, Loki asked, "Are you sure?"

Stephen mumbled something.

"Stephen, are you *sure*?" Loki asked. These denials were rather anemic. Hesitating, trying to think of the various human medicines he'd come to know over the years, he added, "Do you want some Alka-Seltzer?"

"We're *way* beyond Alka-Seltzer," Stephen groaned, his eyes shut tightly.

Loki wrinkled his nose, feeling guilty. "Sorry," he said, trying—and failing—not to sound utterly miserable. It was difficult to decide what the worst part was. The fact that he'd made his lover eat so much of something that it had made him this ill? The fact that Loki had *baked* the thing that had made his lover this ill? Perhaps he'd been wrong about it not poisoning either of them. But he'd used normal Earth ingredients, so surely that couldn't be possible?

If he was being honest with himself, it wasn't really either of those things. It was the fact that it wasn't just any cake that had made Stephen ill. It was a Courting Cake. And it couldn't possibly be a good sign that Stephen was curled into a fetal position and sweating with his arms clutched around his stomach.

The question was, was it worse or better than leaving the cake uneaten?

"It's not your fault," Stephen said, his voice tight with pain.

"One might argue that it's actually *entirely* my fault," Loki replied. With a sigh, he knelt next to the bed and reached out a hand to put it on Stephen's—er, where was he likely not to cause any further discomfort?—his leg. That seemed safe.

Stephen didn't answer, which meant that he agreed but was being nice.

There was silence while Loki kneaded Stephen's thigh lightly. As long as he didn't vomit the cake up, this discomfort would be worth it, even if that wasn't immediately evident to Stephen.

"Loki?"

"Yes?"

Stephen was taking deep, slow breaths in through his nose and letting them out through his mouth. Even though Loki felt guilty, there was something vaguely incongruous—perhaps even a bit amusing—about the Sorcerer Supreme being laid this low by an upset stomach. "Would you actually mind checking the medicine cabinet for any Alka-Seltzer?"

Squeezing Stephen's leg, Loki stood up and padded out of their bedroom. The Sanctum was dark and quiet as he went to the bathroom. Before he opened the medicine cabinet, he summoned a knife to his hand and held it ready. One never knew what lurked inside dark spaces in this house.

Nothing leapt out at him, though. He rifled through the contents of the cabinet. On Asgard, there

were certain potions and medicines that were associated with old age. Loki had watched enough television late at night to know that they existed on Earth, too. Occasionally, he checked to see if any of these pills had appeared in the medicine cabinet. The myriad available treatments for...*performance* seemed of particular concern to Stephen. He joked about it, but Loki knew he worried that one day it would come to that, that he would have to rely on the pills, and that eventually, even medication wouldn't work.

The cabinet was full of the ordinary things, though. Aspirin, Nyquil, the nice shaving set that Loki had bought for Stephen a number of years ago. "So you don't have any excuse not to keep this goatee looking perfect," Loki had said, running his fingers over it.

Stephen had turned his face to kiss Loki's palm and caught Loki's hand in his. "'Perfect' isn't usually the word you use to describe anything about me." To which Loki had smiled and thought to himself *Just not out loud*, though obviously, he had kept this to himself.

The memory made him smile, but he turned his attention back to the medicine cabinet. Toothpaste, a retainer which Stephen insisted was Wong's and Wong denied ownership of. Stephen's cologne, which Loki couldn't help uncapping so he could smell it. Stephen hardly ever wore it, but it turned Loki's insides to mush when he did. And—yes, there it was, Alka-Seltzer. Loki grabbed a glass, filled it with water, and dropped one of the tablets in, watching it fizz. The effervescence seemed loud in the Sanctum's quiet.

Something skittered across the floor and Loki looked sharply towards the sound. Normal houses in New York had mice or rats. The Sanctum...well, it was probably something else. Hopefully Stephen and Wong were aware of it.

He flicked the light off. As he stepped out of the bathroom, he caught sight of Wong coming up the stairs. Oh—good. He needed to talk to Wong.

Still holding the glass of fizzing water, Loki approached him and said, keeping his voice down, "Wong, can I have a word?"

Wong put an arm on the banister and looked at him expectantly, though his eyes flicked to the glass. "You seem busy," Wong said.

"Oh." Loki glanced over his shoulder towards the bedroom. Yes, he probably should bring this back first. "Do you mind waiting a moment?" When Wong waved a hand and shook his head, looking resignedly amused, Loki went back to the bedroom and sat on the bed.

As Stephen propped himself up with a groan and took the glass, Loki said, "You know, I've seen you mortally wounded, and you made less of a fuss then."

"Thanks for the sympathy," Stephen grouched, downing half the glass of fizzing water in one gulp. Loki steadied the glass, even though he knew Stephen didn't really like it when he did so.

Smiling slightly, Loki smoothed Stephen's hair back from his forehead. "Happy to help, Strange."

Stephen made a noise and drank the rest of his Alka-Seltzer. When he was done, Loki took the glass, cupping his palm around the bottom of it. Stephen sank back down on the bed and groaned, "Tell Wong if the Cloak doesn't accept him, it's not because I didn't put in a good word."

Loki rolled his eyes. "You're being very melodramatic."

"You should talk."

Guilt was still pricking at him, so he let this pass without comment. Instead, he smoothed Stephen's hair back again, then tapped the glass with a fingernail and said, "I'm going to rinse this out. I'll be right back."

Stephen made another inarticulate noise as Loki slipped out again. At least Wong was still waiting. Loki strode over to him, vanishing the dirty glass into his pocket dimension, and said, "Can we talk in the study?"

Wong held out an arm and Loki descended the staircase. Hopefully Stephen fell asleep waiting for him to come back and didn't recover enough to come looking for him. Once in the study, Wong crossed his arms over his chest. "What is it?" he asked.

Flicking his fingers, one item after another appeared on the end table next to the sofa, pulled from his pocket dimension. Wong watched them appear, as stoic and silent as always.

Loki stared at them. Wine bottled shortly before Ragnarok, one of the few in existence, as far as he knew. It was pure happenstance that it had ended up in his pocket dimension, and he'd never been able to bring himself to drink it. It was priceless.

Next to the wine, a pair of earrings and a necklace made of brightly shining gold, both things that he'd worn as a woman, but not for some time. Now that he was looking at both pieces of jewelry, he realized he'd stopped wearing them when he'd learned where all of Asgard's gold had come from.

There were several bottles of essential oils that the young woman at the shop had assured him would bring prosperity and love to anyone who used them (and cure headaches). There was a pouch of money—small, because Loki hardly had any money—and a jar of New Asgardian honey. He'd considered trying to bake something, but considering what had happened with the Courting Cake, he was glad he hadn't.

Looking to Loki, Wong asked, "What is all of this?"

"A *mundr*," Loki said, his fingers twisting together. He glanced at the collection, and then realized he'd forgotten something. Fumbling for his phone, he unlocked it and pulled up a photo. "And these chickens, too. They're good layers. And surprisingly affectionate, for chickens." They were actually his favorites, and it would hurt to part with them. But it was worth it for Stephen.

Wong stared at the phone, expressionless. Then, his eyes flicking up to meet Loki's, he said, "I have no idea what's happening right now."

Steadily, Loki replied, "I'm seeking your permission to ask for Stephen's hand in marriage."

There was an excruciating silence.

Then, Wong began laughing. Loki waited, his spine growing stiffer, but Wong didn't stop. He bent double, putting a hand to his leg as though he could hardly support himself. Soon, he was wheezing and waving a hand in the air while Loki stared at him, growing more and more nonplussed.

It occurred to him for the first time that Stephen may have told Wong about proposing, and Loki's response. Or rather, non-response. Was that why he was laughing? Because he knew that the marriage ship had sailed? Loki hadn't even entertained the idea that Wong would say *no* to the *mundr*—after all, he wasn't Stephen's parent. He was a friend; probably more like a brother at this point, but still. This part had very much been a formality.

"I have a package of English muffins, too," Loki said stiffly. "If that helps."

Finally, Wong was able to get his laughter under control, though he started speaking a few times, only to break out in what could only be described as giggles. “Well,” he finally said, clearly still trying hard not to laugh, “I do like English muffins.” He cleared his throat and took a deep breath. Loki thought he might laugh again. Clearing his throat a second time, Wong said, “Is all of this supposed to be some sort of...dowry?”

“It’s called a mundr,” Loki said. “There’s not a bride, is there, so there can’t be a dowry.”

“No, that’s true.” Wong’s amusement seemed to be fading, confusion replacing it. “I don’t understand...any of this. Why are you giving this to me?”

Loki’s lips thinned. He hated that he needed to explain this, partially because this all would have simply been understood on Asgard, and partially because he was afraid, despite how much he believed in what he was doing, that it all sounded a bit...idiotic. Certainly, it would sound old-fashioned to many, if not most, people. Letting his shoulders drop as he looked at the ceiling in supplication, he said, “Stephen’s parents are both dead. So is his sister. He has no family that I’m aware of—”

“I believe there’s a cousin in Nebraska,” Wong said.

Making a face, Loki said, “Yes, isn’t that the one whose house smells like latex? Anyway.” He sucked in a breath. “You’re the closest thing to family that Stephen has. I know that he considers you family, in any case.”

At this, Wong looked surprised. Surely the man realized this? Well, perhaps it was nice to not be the only emotionally clueless person around. Loki ran the fingertips of one hand over the palm of his other hand, fixing Wong with a direct look. “So?”

Wong still looked baffled, but he said, “Yes, I...give you my permission?”

At any other time, the fact that Loki had managed to fluster Wong so much would have been worth getting his phone out for a picture, perhaps a video. But these magic words made Loki light up—briefly, yes, but genuinely, and he felt the brightness of the smile that flashed across his face. Then, he wrestled it under control. This moment deserved some dignity. “Thank you,” he said, inclining his head.

Wong was smiling just a little, too. “Are you asking him tonight?”

Feeling his eyes widen in alarm, Loki said, “Oh—no. No. And Wong—you can’t tell him I asked you this. Or that I gave you all of these things.”

That took care of the smile on Wong’s face. The vague confusion returned, this time accompanied by a touch of exasperation. “What are you up to, Loki?” he asked.

“I’m not up to anything!” Loki said defensively. “Do you honestly think this isn’t sincere?”

Wong hesitated, and then his expression softened. “No,” he said. “I believe that you’re sincere. After all these years, I would think if you weren’t, or if you were in this for some other reason than the genuineness of your feelings, I would have noticed by now.”

Quite honestly, Loki thought Wong might be giving himself too much credit. If Loki had wanted to dupe the two of them into thinking that he really had feelings for Stephen in order to do... something, Norns knew what, then they never would have known. Eight years was nothing to an Asgardian.

That was a sad thought, and Loki didn't particularly want to have sad thoughts when he had just obtained Wong's permission to marry Stephen.

Wong tilted his head. "Why do I need to keep this quiet?"

"Because," Loki said. "I'm doing it the traditional Asgardian way." When Wong glanced at the mundr, he added, trying not to sound aggrieved, "I realize it probably sounds foolish. Or—old-fashioned, maybe."

"That one," Wong said.

Blowing a huff of air out his mouth, Loki said, "Yes well, I suppose it *is* old-fashioned. Certain steps have to be taken—in order—and at...the right...time."

Shit.

Shit.

He'd forgotten all about that part. *All* about it. Portions of the courtship ritual had to be done during certain astronomical phases; when certain constellations were in the sky, when the nebula that surrounded Asgard was in a particular cycle. Obviously that last one was a moot point, but the rest of it was theoretically possible. Frantically, he tried to remember the relevant Asgardian constellations and then, which ones would even be visible from Earth. They would be in entirely different configurations, obviously, which would make determining all of this...challenging.

For now, he pushed it aside. He still had the mundr to deal with, and Wong's apparent disbelief that Loki was genuine. Taking a breath, Loki said, "Please don't tell him. I know we're hardly bosom friends, but surely enough friendship exists between us for that?"

Wong's forehead crinkled. "I thought we *were* good friends."

"I—what?" Loki had been ready to argue, arming his weapons for the fight, but this drew him up short. "You did? I mean, we are?"

Gesturing, Wong said, "You're here all the time; even when you *weren't* here it felt like you were —"

At this, Loki perked up. "What do you mean?"

A long-suffering expression passed over Wong's face. "You know I'm referring to before you and Stephen began dating."

"Yes," Loki said, trying not to sound eager. "What do you mean, even when I wasn't here it felt like I was? Did he talk about me?"

Looking at him in a way that somehow implied an eye-roll, Wong replied, "Yes."

"Yes?" Was that it? Really? *Yes?* But Wong kept his mouth stubbornly shut, and Loki let it go. He was the last person to force someone to speak who didn't want to. "Anyway, the point is, Stephen can't know. I need to do this right. Please—take the mundr. It's not exactly a princely sum, but it's what I've got."

Wong glanced at the mundr sitting on the side table. "I don't need any of this, Loki. Keep it."

"No, you have to take it," Loki said. "It's not *optional*. This is part of it."

“What am I going to do with chickens?” Wong asked flatly. “And don’t you think Stephen would notice them running around? At least, until something ate them.”

Loki tried not to pale, though this had occurred to him. He was still trying to come to terms with it. “The *mundr* must be accepted in order for permission to be granted,” Loki said. “It’s an exchange.”

Raising a hand to his temples to rub them, Wong said, “Do I have to take all of it?”

“I…” Loki stopped and thought. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure. If he didn’t have to sacrifice his favorite chickens to whatever interdimensional predators were scuttling around the Sanctum, but he could still accept Wong’s permission in good faith, then shouldn’t he?

“Because if I don’t,” Wong said, “I’ll just take the honey and the English muffins.”

Loki’s brow furrowed. “The English muffins.”

“You said you have some.”

“Er, well—yes.” Loki pulled them from his pocket dimension with a shimmer of green and tossed them next to the rest of the *mundr* offerings. “What about the wine? The jewelry?”

Something that looked like a smile twitched at Wong’s mouth. “I don’t really wear jewelry.” When Loki snorted, a smile definitely passed over Wong’s face. “Keep the wine. You two should drink it at the wedding.”

At this, Loki’s heart did something very stupid. *Wedding*. He hadn’t even thought about a wedding; he’d been so caught up in making Stephen his fiancé. It was hard to tell if the thought was thrilling or horrifying.

Wong was still smiling a little as he picked up the honey and English muffins. His brow furrowing, Loki asked, “Are you truly certain that’s all you want?”

Shaking the package of English muffins, Wong said, “This is my favorite brand.”

And then—did he *wink*? As he left the study, Wong said, “Let me be the first to congratulate you.”

Loki smiled, but he couldn’t help thinking this was somewhat premature. After all, they weren’t engaged yet. In fact, Stephen’s behavior had indicated that he wouldn’t even live long enough for a proposal, let alone the wedding. After gathering up the wine, the jewelry, the essential oils and the money and stowing them back in his pocket dimension, Loki went back upstairs, letting himself quietly into Stephen’s—their—bedroom.

The light was still on, but Stephen appeared to be asleep, curled on his side with his hands balled into fists and tucked in front of his stomach. For a moment, Loki leaned against the doorframe, his arms folded over his chest, and watched his lover. Sleep normally soothed the lines from his face, but he must have still been in pain, because there were wrinkles in his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. Guilt bit at Loki again.

At least Stephen hadn’t vomited. The cake had been undeniably hard to stomach—not like Loki himself, in all honesty. His brow furrowed. Stephen always had, though. He let a slow breath out.

Quietly, he closed the door and changed for bed. Stephen hadn’t bothered to change, so Loki did it for him with magic, swapping his t-shirt and jeans for pajamas that Loki kept in his pocket dimension. He pulled out a quilt, as well, since Stephen had fallen asleep on top of the sheets and blanket. Before long, he’d get cold, but Loki didn’t want to wake him to get him under the covers.

He eased himself into bed, pulling the quilt over both of them, and flicked his fingers to turn the light off. With a sigh, he pressed up against Stephen's back and wrapped his arms around him, resting his face against the back of Stephen's neck and kissing it gently. "I love you," he whispered, half hoping Stephen was too asleep to hear him.

One of Stephen's hands unballled and reached for Loki's. Maybe it was better that he'd been awake enough to hear, after all. Their fingers twined together, and Loki closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, something went right for Loki! Thank you for reading along everyone! I have been surprised, delighted, and honestly pretty humbled by the enthusiasm you've shown for this fic so far, so I really hope you continue to enjoy it. And not to sound like a broken record, but kudos and comments are always very much appreciated!

Shoutout to my wonderful beta mareebird for her input into the mundr components and the contents of the Sanctum medicine cabinet XD

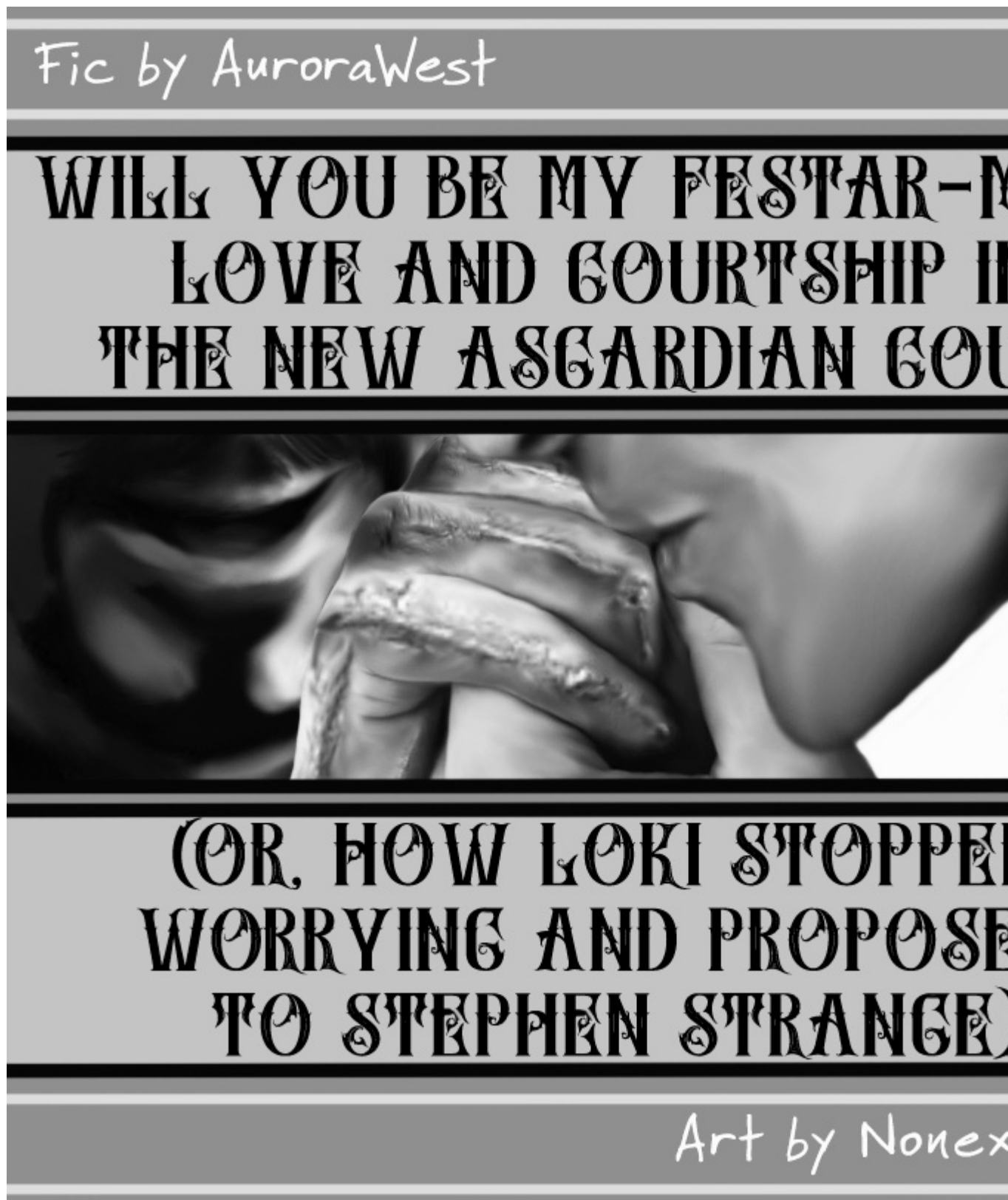
You should also come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! I like to talk about Loki.

Hårkullornas

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The tip of Loki's tongue was stuck between his front teeth as he glared down at the task in front of him, which he was finally, at last, beginning to get the hang of. His face might be permanently

stuck in a frown after this, but he was probably good-looking enough to weather it. Just one more weave, and he'd be able to knot it, and it would all stay together—

“What are you doing?”

Loki jumped just enough that he bit his tongue, which made him yelp in pain and drop what he was doing. *That* made him curse.

When he looked up at Jane, she was wincing. “Sorry.”

“Oh, it's fine,” Loki said, gesturing towards the floor. “That was only the twentieth time I've started that *and* the attempt that I've made the most progress on.”

Her wince was more pronounced this time. “Well, at least now you know what you're doing?”

“Bold assumption to make,” Loki said darkly. He leaned down and squinted at the ground, looking for the braid that he'd dropped, which was undoubtedly no longer a braid. It was hard to see on the floor, but finally, he picked it up delicately. By the time he'd straightened up, Jane had sat down on the sofa next to him and was staring at the coffee table.

“Loki,” she said, “is that a pile of hair?”

He glanced at it. “Yes.” It was actually supposed to be two piles of hair, but throughout the course of this exercise, the two piles, one black, one brown (with the occasional gray) had become progressively more co-mingled. It didn't matter; he could tell them apart both by sight and feel.

There was a silence while she stared at him. Finally, she raised her eyebrows. “Do I really have to ask?”

“You don't *have* to.”

She folded her hands in her lap and leaned her elbows on her legs. Clearly, *not* asking was out of the question. “Why are you braiding hair?”

With a sigh, he stopped squinting at the failed attempt in his hands and looked at her, feeling the irritated set of his mouth. He wouldn't go so far as to call it a *scowl*, only because he preferred not to scowl at Jane.

“Perhaps I've taken up a new hobby,” he said.

Giving him a very Jane-Foster-esque look—which was to say, a look that conveyed, *you know I'm not taking any of your bullshit, Loki*, she said, “Look, I'm used to weird by now, between having *been* the Goddess of Thunder and being married to the God of Thunder, not to mention basically having the Sorcerer Supreme as my brother-in-law—oh.” An understanding look passed over her face. “This is about Stephen, isn't it?”

“I find that most things are, since the two of us became *involved*,” Loki said distractedly, trying to begin the braid again. The center core of the knotwork *had* to be a single piece of hair from each of them. Of course, that in itself had presented a problem, since Stephen's hair was short. On Asgard, most people wouldn't have worn their hair short enough that braiding two strands together would have been an issue.

Jane was still staring at the hair on the table. “What's the point of this?” she asked.

“To show Stephen I love him,” Loki said, trying to start the braid again. He'd always thought

himself dexterous; nimble, but his fingers felt like graceless sausages.

Even out of the corner of his eye, he could see the expression on her face, halfway between exasperated and disbelieving. “Loki, no offense, but I’m pretty sure Stephen’s known for a good fifteen years that you love him.”

Glancing up at her, Loki said, “I hardly think he knew *fifteen years* ago. We’ve only been together eight.”

“Oh, yeah. You were totally subtle,” she said. When he glanced up at her, nonplussed, she pressed her lips together in what was a clear attempt not to smile. “Didn’t you literally go to the Empire State Building together *on* Valentine’s Day when you were staying at the Sanctum?”

Huffily, Loki replied, “Well, when you put it like *that*, yes, it sounds like—we only went because we happened to be walking in the area, and Stephen felt one of those interdimensional disturbances that he does—which was *real*,” he added, as it was becoming clear that she thought the whole thing had been a charade orchestrated by Stephen to get Loki to the top of the Empire State Building on Valentine’s Day. Quite frankly, nothing sounded less romantic, but that particular trip had resulted in three hours of wandering through the bowels of the Empire State Building, looking for whatever ripples in the fabric of the multiverse Stephen had sensed, which was even *less* romantic.

In the end it had been minor. And alright, *fine*, they had gone to the top deck, but only because at that point, they’d spent so much time there—what was a bit more? The afternoon had been waning; the winter sun glinting off the skyscrapers, and Stephen had folded his arms over his chest and leaned a shoulder against the glass window. Neither of them had particularly wanted to go outside, though Stephen had pointed out that the heat lamps were on to make it more bearable. Loki had shrugged. The view had been nice—the Village and Tribeca in one direction, the Verrazzano Bridge far in the distance and the rays of the dying afternoon sun yellow on the Hudson and New York Harbor. In the other direction lay the former Stark Tower, now with an insignia on the side that Loki didn’t recognize.

“People wait hours to come up here?” Loki had finally asked. The two of them hadn’t. Apparently ridding the building’s basement of pests from another dimension came with *some* perks; in this case the fast track to the top floor.

“Yep,” Stephen had said. When Loki had simply made a dismissive sound, he’d snorted and added, “Oh, come on. Let’s hear it.”

Loki had glanced at him. “I would just go to one of the many much taller buildings in this city and invent some business that would require me to go to the top floor.”

Stephen had looked at him. After a second, he’d smiled. “So you *are* a sucker for a good view.”

Admitting to this had seemed like allowing Strange to win at something, though he couldn’t have said what. He’d rolled his eyes and mumbled, “Who isn’t?” They’d stayed up there for awhile, standing shoulder to shoulder. Not touching, of course. Loki had been years and years from being able to admit that the feelings he’d had for Stephen in those days had been tentatively romantic. He’d still been clinging to performative hostility. But perhaps Stephen *had* known. Stephen had never seemed to doubt that the two of them belonged together.

Before he got too lost in the memory—and before the expression on his face got too idiotic—Loki cleared his throat and said, “It’s to show him that I love him *symbolically*.”

“Oh,” Jane said. It had to be said that she was looking at him as though she already thought he

might be a bit of an idiot, regardless of the expression on his face. “Do you think he’s questioning that? The symbolic strength of your love?”

“You’re the one who’s supposed to be on my side.”

She laughed. “Okay, I’m sorry.” When he glared at her, she added, “I am! It’s just...you’re braiding hair.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Reaching for one of the hair piles, she delicately picked one up between two fingers. It was a strand of hair that was actually several strands of Stephen’s hair, knotted together to make a longer one. He hadn’t known how else to deal with the length problem. “How did you do this? Did you tie tiny little knots?”

Flicking a wrist, Loki said, “I did that with magic.”

“So...” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Why don’t you just do the whole thing with magic?”

“Jane.” Loki gave her an exasperated look. “That would be *cheating*. Magic doesn’t fix relationship problems.”

Her mouth twitched. “Right,” she said seriously. “Of course.”

She didn’t speak as he worked. This time, finally, he completed the first braid, knotted it off, and leaned back on the sofa. Sweat was standing out on his brow. In theory, this was the *easy* part. Though he’d never made a habit of wearing braids in his hair, he certainly was capable of it. The rest of the hårkullornas would take rather more...finesse. And skill. Skill which, if he was being honest with himself, he didn’t have. He had only a vague memory of what a proper hårkullornas looked like, and a vague memory was hardly sufficient for courting the love of his life.

Those words distracted him and did something to his stomach. He didn’t know if he felt ill with worry over this or butterflies from the fact that he could think of Stephen in that way. *The love of his life*. It was hardly a new phrase to him. He’d been thinking of Stephen in those terms for at least as long as they’d been together. The fact that he’d found this person—the person who meant that much to him, who filled a space in his life that Loki had long ago resigned himself to leaving empty—would never *not* be a marvel. And the fact that this person’s life span was a fraction of his would never be something he didn’t lament.

This wasn’t the time to think about that. The last thing Loki wanted to do was work that kind of sadness into the hårkullornas.

Anyway, since he had only a vague memory of what it was supposed to look like, he’d had to use his phone to search for something on the internet that might be similar. There *was* a similar tradition, as it turned out, mostly brought over to America from Swedish people in the nineteenth century. It had nothing to do with courtship, but the technique was more or less the same.

“Do you want some help?” Jane finally asked.

Loki shook his head. The offer was kind, but, like the cake, he had to do it by himself. “If you *would* like to do me a favor though,” he said, “I have about three days worth of blackberries to pick in the garden.”

She patted his shoulder and got up from the couch, “You know, I just remembered I have an email to answer from Erik about a paper we’re co-authoring.” When Loki pursed his lips at her, she

laughed and said, “Okay, fine. I’ll pick them. But you’re going to owe me for this.”

Loki pressed his finger down to keep the hårkullornas from unraveling and said, “I’ll proofread your next paper for you.”

“You do that anyway.”

“Well, before it was out of the goodness of my heart. This time it will be as a favor.”

With a snort, Jane went to the door and pulled on a pair of Wellington boots, saying as she went outside, “Good luck with your weird hair thing.”

As Loki turned his concentration back to it, he lifted his finger just a bit too far. Everything he’d woven around the central braid came undone.

Gritting his teeth, he started over.

The hårkullornas took him four days to complete, at the end of which his fingers ached, his eyes burned from squinting, and he thought he might have a permanent furrow in his brow. On the second day, Stephen had shown up unannounced in New Asgard, but luckily, Loki’s bedroom had been dark, and Stephen hadn’t noticed the, er, craft project sitting on top of the small bookcase near the door. Plus, Loki kept him distracted, not that this was much of a hardship.

When they were done with said distraction, Loki had slipped out of bed to use the bathroom. On the way out the door, he’d surreptitiously vanished the hårkullornas to his pocket dimension.

Stephen had left early, despite Loki’s protestations that it was one in the morning in New York. “Yeah, that’s when this thing seems to feed,” Stephen had said as he’d gotten out of bed and bent over to retrieve his pants.

Loki had admired the view, then reached out to wrap his hand around Stephen’s thigh, preventing him from pulling his pants on. “What thing?” he’d asked. “Can I help?”

Turning around and waggling his eyebrows, Stephen had said, “You did. I needed to relieve some tension.”

With a scoff, Loki had said, “Oh, thank you ever so much. It’s *so* nice to feel needed.”

Stephen had paused, looking down at Loki. There was far more intensity in his gaze than Loki had expected to see, and Loki dropped his hand away from Stephen’s leg. Stephen had pulled his underwear and pants on, then his doublet and robe, in silence, while Loki watched. This bit of sarcasm had been a mistake. It had exposed something; some fault line, a crack, that Loki had feared the existence of ever since he’d ignored Stephen’s proposal.

But then, Stephen had pushed the sheet aside and climbed on top of Loki, stretching out on top of him, fully clothed against Loki’s nakedness. “You know I need you,” Stephen had said, his face inches from Loki’s and his voice low.

With a noise of possible-assent, Loki slid an arm over Stephen’s back, hooking his fingers into one of the belts around Stephen’s middle. “For more than just relieving tension?” Loki asked, kissing Stephen’s chin.

“Mm.” Stephen had breathed out slowly and buried his face in the crook of Loki’s neck. “Don’t be an idiot,” he’d said, his voice muffled.

“That’s my line,” Loki had said, smiling at the feeling of Stephen’s breath puffing against his skin.

Stephen’s lips had brushed Loki’s neck, and then he’d gotten up with a groan that was probably only partly related to leaving Loki’s embrace. He *was* fifty-six years old.

After Stephen had gone and Loki had gotten up, he’d had to stifle a groan, too, since what awaited him was more h rkullornas.

But finally, after four days, he was finished with it. He hated it. He wanted to set it on fire. And he was positive Stephen would hate it too. But it was tradition.

Loki put it in a box so he wouldn’t have to look at it between now and the next time he went to the Sanctum. When Jane asked to see it, he flatly refused, and apparently his tone was sour enough that she didn’t feel it was worth her time to push the issue.

When he arrived at the Sanctum that Friday, the first person he encountered was Wong, who was sitting in the foyer reading something.

“Hello,” Wong said, turning a page of the book and glancing up as Loki stepped through a portal. “Stephen’s dealing with something upstairs.”

“Does it have six legs?” Loki asked.

“Ten eyes, actually,” Wong said.

There was a crash from upstairs and the sound of running water. Loki flicked his eyes upwards, then looked back to Wong. “Don’t you think you should help him?”

Turning another page, Wong replied, “He said he doesn’t need help.”

“Yes, that sounds like him.”

“It’s been my experience,” Wong said, “that he usually ‘doesn’t need help’ when your presence is imminent.”

At this, Loki raised his eyebrows, smiling slightly. “Are you implying Stephen is showing off?”

“I wasn’t trying to imply it.” Wong glanced up at Loki. “I was making a statement to the obvious.”

There was another crash, then a repeated banging. Both Loki and Wong waited. Water gushed again overhead. Loki’s eyebrows drew together and he looked back to Wong. “I think I’m just going to go upstairs and check on him.”

“Good idea,” Wong said.

Loki strode up the stairs, following the sound of running water to the Rotunda of Gateways. When he arrived, something with tentacles was struggling to drag itself through one of the doors, which was open onto a plane of existence that Loki didn’t recognize as being on Earth.

It *did* have ten eyes. At least, Loki thought it had ten eyes. It was hard to tell with the way the tentacles were thrashing around. If he was Wong, he probably would have led with those.

Leaning against the side of the doorframe and crossing his arms over his chest, Loki asked, “Can I offer my assistance, Doctor Strange?”

“What?” Stephen turned around, and when his eyes fell on Loki, they lit up. The ten-eyed

monstrosity took advantage of this moment of distraction and thwacked Stephen over the head with a tentacle, heaving itself further into the room with another rush of water.

As water flowed by Loki's feet, he couldn't help noticing that it was actually far too thick and viscous to *be* water. Ugh. Disgusting. It was some sort of mucus or something. Without waiting for Stephen to ask, Loki held up a hand, magic lighting it green. This thing didn't seem like it should be much of a chore for Stephen, so what was the problem?

A spell formed in his palm, but Stephen waved him off, saying, "No, don't, I'm trying not to hurt her."

"Her?" Loki asked, lowering his hand, though green light still flickered around his fingers.

Stephen was casting a spell that wove strands of orange magic around and under the creature. "You know how cats will find a hiding spot to give birth?" he asked.

Making a face, Loki said, "Oh, don't tell me." He waded through the liquid—which he was afraid was amniotic fluid—until he reached Stephen's side. "You always said you were allergic to cats," Loki said. "Don't tell me *this* is the pet you want."

There was a look of concentration on Stephen's face as he cast his spell, which was impressive, considering something wet and pinkish was dribbling down the bridge of his nose. Loki let his own magic die away. "I guess she thought the Sanctum looked like a cozy place to have her, uh—" Another wave of amniotic fluid flowed through the Rotunda, washing over both of their boots.

When Loki arched an eyebrow at him, Stephen finished, "—Let's go with 'young.'"

"What a compliment," Loki said. "Your home is the premier birthing destination for transdimensional tentacle monsters."

"Could be worse," Stephen said, his eyebrows drawn together as he worked his spell further.

"Unless what this species needs after they give birth is a readily available food source for their *young*," Loki pointed out.

"Well, that's always a possibility," Stephen said. "Wouldn't be the first time." His hands made a series of motions and the net of magic that he'd woven drew closed over the creature. It gave a high-pitched screech and flailed its tentacles, smacking the several inches of fluid that covered the floor in the Rotunda, which sent droplets flying through the air.

Loki snapped his mouth shut, but not fast enough. He spluttered and gagged, his attention now more focused on the fact that he'd ingested the bodily fluid of a pregnant creature with ten eyes and at least as many tentacles than on what was happening with said creature.

There was another sound, and then silence.

Well, not silence. The amniotic fluid was sloshing thickly against the walls.

Loki pulled a bottle of vodka from his pocket dimension that he mainly used as an emergency antiseptic, uncapped it, and filled his mouth with it, swishing it around before spitting it out, straight on the floor, and making a face.

Stephen watched this, one eyebrow raised. There was a glob of fluid in his hair which he didn't seem to have noticed. Or perhaps he didn't care, since he was used to this kind of thing. Making a face, Loki tipped the bottle back and swallowed a mouthful of the vodka. It burned enough as it

went down, so surely it had to be capable of killing whatever disgusting bacteria were in the fluid that was now inside him. Ugh. He couldn't do this job. The multiverse was lucky it had Stephen.

"Where did you send it?" Loki asked.

"Remember the second library?" When Loki nodded, Stephen said, "Guess we'll check on her in a few days."

With a snort, Loki said "*We* will not be checking on her. That very much sounds like a job for the Sorcerer Supreme." Glancing at the door that the creature had been trying to come through, which was now innocuously open to a sun-dappled, grassy hillside, Loki said, "That wasn't the thing you were after the other night, was it?"

"No," Stephen said. "That thing was a lot uglier."

"Mm hm." Loki motioned to his own hair and said, "You have something on your head."

Stephen reached up and felt the glop in his hair. "Probably calls for a shower."

Smiling slightly, Loki asked, "Am I invited?"

"Well," Stephen said, "it's in your hair too, so yeah."

When Loki made a face, Stephen chuckled. He opened a portal in the floor, draining the amniotic fluid to—somewhere. Sometimes Loki wondered if Stephen sent things like this to the same pocket dimension that he'd once sent Loki to. It was sort of an insulting thought. He'd get annoyed, but Stephen had apologized long ago for that.

Once the fluid drained away, Stephen teleported them straight to the bathroom, where both of them stripped off their clothes. The Sanctum's shower was really too small for the two of them to be in there at the same time, but it had never stopped them. Loki had to reach around Stephen for the soap and shampoo, which gave him the opportunity to lean against Stephen's back and kiss his shoulder. Stephen grabbed Loki's arm and wrapped it around his stomach, and Loki pulled him back against his own chest, leaving his lips pressed against Stephen's skin.

Loki's clothes weren't in much of a state to put back on, so he changed into some of Stephen's. This was, personally, never his favorite thing to do, though he had to admit that the old sweatshirt and sweatpants were comfortable. Unstylish, but comfortable. His own clothes got balled up, stuck in a garbage bag, and vanished to his pocket dimension to deal with later.

"In the interest of full disclosure," Stephen said, "Music in the Park is happening again tonight."

"Not Haydn, I take it?"

"Mahler."

"Ah. You must like Mahler."

Stephen was still dressed only in his underwear, possibly because he was waiting to hear if they were going out, possibly because he just liked the way Loki was looking at him. With a shrug, he said, "What can I say; I like the Romantics."

Rubbing at his damp hair, Loki looked at Stephen's bed. There was a stack of books on the bedside table. Considering his current sartorial choices, sitting in bed and reading seemed like a better option than going out.

Plus...the hårkullornas. Perhaps it was better to give it to Stephen sooner rather than later.

Which could be said for other things, once the hårkullornas was out of the way.

Stephen was looking at him, waiting for an answer. There was a t-shirt in his hands, open and ready to be donned. Loki smiled at him. "If we stay in, does that mean you won't get dressed?"

With a laugh, Stephen said, "Let me put a shirt on at least, Odinson. We have to leave something to the imagination once in awhile."

Personally, Loki was hoping it was one of the shirts that was tight enough that it *didn't* leave all that much to the imagination. Even if it wasn't, he was in a mood to curl against Stephen's side and feel his lover's body against his—not necessarily in a way that would lead to sex. The intimacy he shared with Stephen, the quiet closeness and the understanding, was what he truly craved. Not that he didn't crave the sex, too.

But for now...Loki held a hand out. The box with the hårkullornas appeared in his palm and he turned to face Stephen, thrusting the box at him. "Here. I made this for you."

"Made what?" Stephen asked, pulling his shirt over his head. There was the barest flicker of trepidation on his face when he emerged. "It's not more food, is it?" When Loki gave him a nonplussed look, Stephen said, "So...no?"

"I learned my lesson with the cake," Loki said. Not really; the rest of the courtship just didn't require any baking. And it was a good thing, too, because he didn't think he'd be able to get Stephen to eat another baked good that he'd made.

"You're a good cook," Stephen said. "Just...maybe stick to Kringla Bakery for the other stuff."

Rolling his eyes, Loki said, "Noted. Are you going to open that? I promise it isn't food. Or the vague approximation of food."

Kringla Bakery, *honestly*. New Asgard's sole bakery catered to tourists and tourists only. Loki wouldn't be caught dead in there.

And Stephen looked *slightly* guilty, which was good. Still, he didn't say anything as he pulled the lid off the box. Loki watched him beadily, trying not to appear nervous. Jane's reaction to the hårkullornas was difficult to shake.

Truthfully, Loki knew it was a bit...bizarre. He remembered hearing Volstagg talk about a hårkullornas once in the context of presenting it to a woman. As Loki recalled, he'd made a snide comment about how any woman would surely be absolutely *thrilled* to receive a hårkullornas from Volstagg, especially if it was made from his beard hair. Volstagg had shot back that at least he could *grow* a beard.

It had been below the belt. Loki could grow a beard. He just preferred not to.

Stephen didn't say anything. He stared at the box. Loki didn't say anything either, waiting for a reaction. Finally, Stephen pulled it from the box, sticking a finger through one of the loops.

If you squinted, it didn't look *too* asymmetrical. If you squinted and sort of looked at it from the side. And if you did that, you also might not notice how the braiding was uneven, thicker in some parts and thinner in others, and how the pattern ended abruptly at the bottom. Loki had run out of hair. Stephen's hair, to be precise. And plucking himself half bald to finish it was rather missing the point.

“This is...” Stephen began, staring at it.

When he trailed off, not finishing the sentence, Loki asked, “Yes?”

Stephen looked up at him. “What?”

“You said, ‘this is,’ and you didn’t finish,” Loki said. “What is it?”

“Yeah that’s...kind of my question,” Stephen said.

Loki pressed his lips together, licking them, before he said, “It’s an Asgardian craft.”

“Okay,” Stephen said.

This was clearly not sufficient explanation. “I just wanted to make something for you,” Loki tried.

“Uh huh.” Stephen looked at it again, narrowing his eyes. “It’s really...uh, nice.”

It wasn’t nice. Loki wasn’t an idiot. He could *see* it wasn’t nice. He’d made the thing. Still, it made his chest hurt with some kind of unidentifiable emotion that Stephen would tell this poor lie to spare his feelings. Few people had ever lied for the purpose of sparing his feelings.

“So is this like, a new hobby?” Stephen said.

“No,” Loki said, then, realizing this was a mistake, corrected himself, “Er, perhaps. I haven’t decided if I like it.”

Stephen appeared to be struggling with how to respond. Finally, he seemed to decide it was more sensible to give up. Instead, he held the hårkullornas closer to his face in study. “What is this made out of, some kind of yarn?”

Putting his hands behind his back and twisting his fingers together, Loki said, “It’s...ah, hair.”

“Right, but like, what kind of animal?” Stephen said, still peering at it.

Loki pressed his lips together and dug the fingernails of one hand into his palm. The words wouldn’t come, so he just watched Stephen, knowing he was making a face that spoke volumes—a sort of mix of apology and resignation that would take Stephen a few more seconds to piece together with his question.

When Loki didn’t speak, Stephen looked up, meeting his eyes, and furrowed his brow. He opened his mouth to repeat his question—and then he looked back to the hårkullornas. Realization flashed over his face and he dropped it.

Loki tried not to wince. At least it wasn’t bad luck to drop a hårkullornas. At least, he didn’t think so. Perhaps it was. Did he know? Perhaps there was someone in New Asgard who could actually *tell* him about all these courtship rituals. Perhaps he shouldn’t have been trying to do all of this with no help, no guidance, no assistance. He wished his mother was still alive so he could ask her. He even wished his father was still alive.

If they were alive, they could meet Stephen. They could attend the wedding. Doubtless, Odin would have at first been unhappy about both of his sons ending up with humans, even if Jane wasn’t technically really *human* in the strictest sense, anymore. She had once been the Goddess of Thunder and was now a Valkyrie—even if she hadn’t been born Aesir, she was close enough, now. By all appearances, she’d have their lifespan. She hadn’t aged a day since she’d taken up Mjølfnir,

all those years ago.

It had occasionally amused Loki to imagine his father's reaction to Stephen. The fact that he was a man would *probably* not have been a problem. Odin had never cared about Loki's interest in both women and men, though there had once been a horrifically awkward conversation about 'carrying on the royal line' and Loki's interests being fine, but in the long run...

Loki had been at an age where seeing his father so embarrassed that he would trail off and not finish a sentence would ordinarily have deeply amused him, likely to the point of pushing said embarrassing subject as hard as possible. But when he had realized that his father was telling him it was fine to have sex with men as long as he one day provided a legitimate child that would be in line for the throne—presumably not by giving birth to one himself but by impregnating a woman, a woman whom he would be married to—Loki had very nearly sunk through the floor in mortification.

Honestly, he couldn't even remember how he'd responded. He may have blacked out. In any case, it was the only time the subject of romance or sex had come up between Loki and his father. His mother had been the one to give him The Talk, which had also been embarrassing. But she had made it clear to him that what mattered to her was that he was with someone who made him happy.

If she could see him—and he hoped, and thought, that she could—then she would see how happy he was. And to be honest, Loki thought Stephen could have won even his father over. Stephen's smile and laugh were impossible to resist. No one had wanted to resist them more than Loki, and, well, look where he'd ended up.

Bending over to scoop the hårkullornas off his bedroom floor, Stephen asked, "This is human hair?"

"Yes," Loki said. "And, well, no. It's Asgardian, also."

"Whose?"

"Ours!" Loki said, affronted. "You think I made this out of random human and Asgardian hair?"

Stephen looked at it again, appearing disappointingly unsure of the answer to this question. "This is...sweet," he said, in a tone that implied the opposite. "But also kind of weird."

Ah. Yes. There was the honesty.

Stephen held the hårkullornas out at arm's length, as though it might be dangerous. "You've been collecting my hair?"

"Um."

Holding up a hand, Stephen said, "Never mind, I don't want to know." He glanced at it again and repeated, as though he was trying to convince mostly himself, "It's sweet."

Loki ran a hand through his hair and grabbed the hårkullornas back, which Stephen looked a bit relieved by. "I suppose you don't necessarily like remembering that you're romantically involved with an alien," he said, which was a bit nonsensical, considering he'd found an existing tradition on Earth.

Stephen's eyebrows drew together. "What?"

Closing his hand around the hårkullornas, Loki asked, "What are you going to do with it?" He

knew he sounded defensive. Knowing Stephen would think it was odd and actually *seeing* that he found it odd were two very different things. It hurt more than he'd expected it to. Especially because of what it *was*. Yes, it was a strange tradition, but surely Stephen could see the symbolism in it? Their hair, woven together, knotted in a weave that was supposed to represent commitment and fidelity? Though, admittedly, it looked more like the piles of seaweed that washed up on New Asgard's shores after storms.

Now, Loki wished he wasn't wearing an old Columbia sweatshirt and sweatpants. It was a lot easier to be taken seriously in his own clothes, which yes, owed a lot to Earth styles, but were certainly more fashionable than anything Stephen owned. He drew in a breath. How was he supposed to pass this off without looking utterly insane? Clearly, he was hurt. The story that he'd given Stephen, that it was just a new hobby he'd picked up, was already odd. Was it better to dig himself deeper into this hole?

Because the thing was, he needed Stephen to keep the hårkullornas close. As in, under his pillow close. Until the wedding night. And Loki had no idea how he could possibly broach that topic with something that he had supposedly made on a whim, because he was looking to pick up a new hobby or two.

An unpleasant thought crept through his head. If he couldn't be honest with Stephen about this; if he couldn't be taken seriously during this courtship, then perhaps Loki shouldn't be courting him at all. Perhaps this wasn't meant to be.

"Loki, what's going on?" Stephen asked.

"Nothing," Loki said. He flopped down on the bed and grabbed a book, the hårkullornas still clutched in his hand. "Nothing," he repeated. "Come here. You don't have to put pants on."

Stephen smiled, though there was still a vaguely confused expression in his eyes. Perhaps almost troubled. He sat down on the bed, though, then stretched his legs out as he leaned back against the headboard. "So you want me to treat you more like an alien?"

Rolling his eyes, Loki said, "Shut up."

Stephen reached out and ran a hand up the center of Loki's chest. "Take me to your leader."

"Stop embarrassing yourself."

When Stephen flashed a smile at him, *the* smile, Loki knew that the two of them couldn't be anything but meant to be. Loki reached for him with one hand, pulling him close to kiss him.

With the other hand, he slipped the hårkullornas under Stephen's pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there is really a tradition of making jewelry out of hair, though it historically had nothing to do with courtship, and I kind of invented the name because I couldn't find the actual Swedish word. If you're interested in it (it is, as Stephen observes, weird), here's a [National Geographic article about it](#). And for more hairwork (!), here's an article about a [hairwork art exhibit in my home state](#), which I'm quite sad to have missed.

This was 100% inspired by the fact that my mom has a piece of hairwork made of a family member's hair (my...great grandmother, I want to say?). It's *so* weird, and I love it so much, and when I told my mom it had inspired a chapter in this fic, she said I should take it.

Mahler's most popular symphony is probably [Symphony No. 5](#).

Thank you so much as always for continuing to read this fic! I really hope you're all enjoying it. Loki's trying, you guys. He's trying so hard. As always, I would absolutely love to know what you think if you want to leave me a comment.

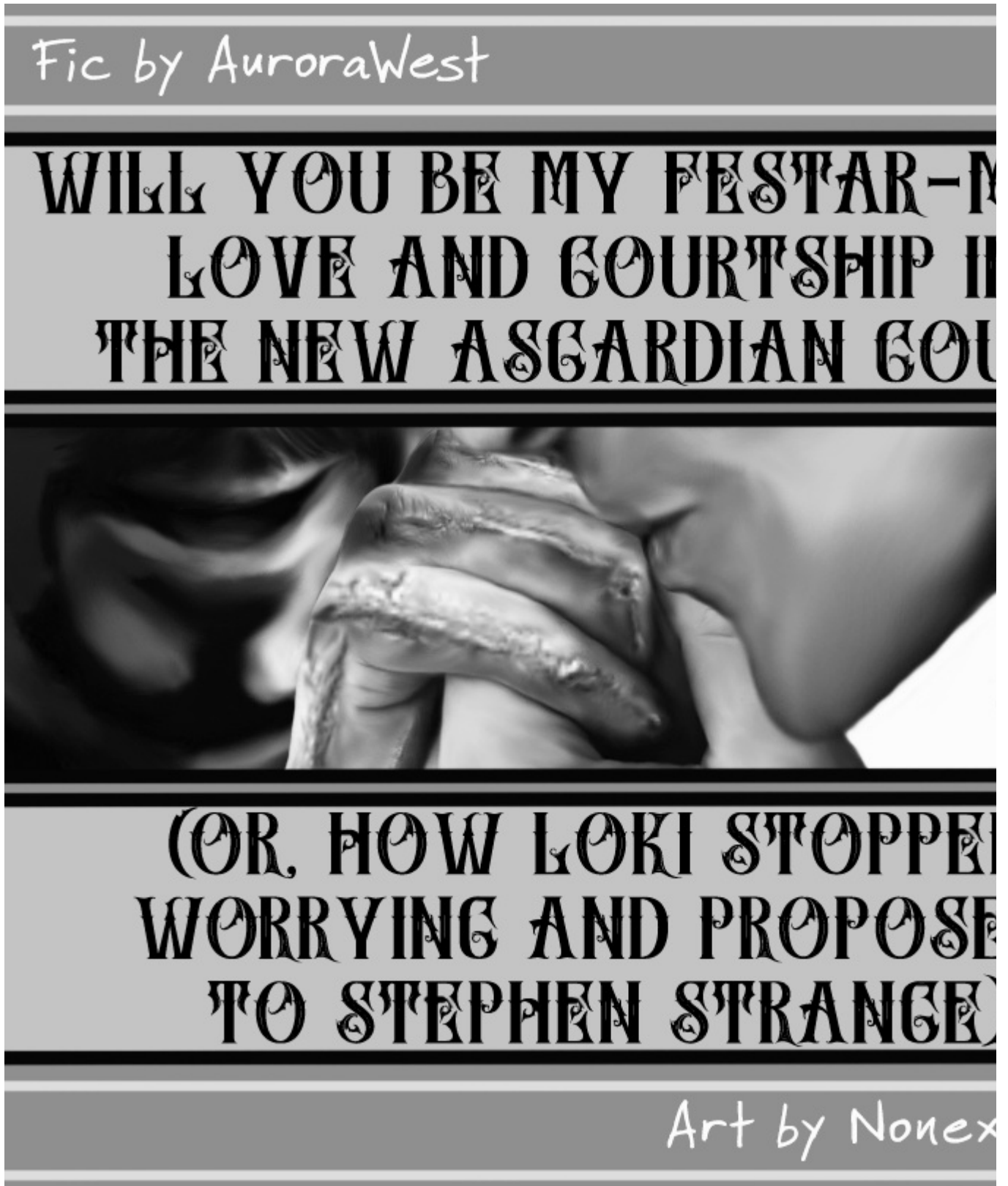
You should also come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! I like to talk about Loki.

Oslo

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



After the hârkullornas, Loki had assumed he was, as they said, home free. If he could craft something with some semblance of knot work and form out of hair, then he could certainly tackle

the one remaining craft on the list: knitting a shirt.

People knit. It was very popular. Clearly, just about anyone could do it, and that meant Loki could do it, too. Hadn't he mastered magic at a young age? Was he not deadly with a blade? He could repair most mechanical systems in a spaceship, and most of the electronic ones, too. He knew how to manage beehives, chicken coops, and a flock of bad-tempered sheep. He could cook, even if he couldn't bake. And he'd taught himself many of those things on his own. A quick search on the computer pulled up a wealth of introductory guides to knitting, videos showing exactly what to do, and patterns.

And alright, knitting a sweater wasn't exactly *introductory*, but how hard could it be? For Norns' sake, even *Thor* could knit. If Thor could do it, Loki could certainly do it.

Though the Courting Cake disaster had rather proved that, in fact, it was possible for Loki to be incompetent at something that Thor excelled at. Whatever. He'd count that a fluke.

The first thing he had to do was acquire yarn. The yarn, ideally, would come from both of their farms. Obviously, the literalness of this had fallen out of practice, though the joke was on Loki on that count—New Asgard very much *did* have sheep, and spinning the wool into yarn was one of the cottage industries that brought income to the town. Kingdom? Realm, in a strictly legal sense, but it would always feel a bit odd to refer to it as the Realm of New Asgard when open-top tour buses came through every other day in the summer. Anyway, New Asgardian yarn wasn't a problem. He'd already spoken to Ingrid, who dyed it, and she'd had some nice, thick stuff in a pretty blue that would bring out the same color in Stephen's eyes.

But that still left yarn from Stephen's farm. And as Stephen didn't have a farm, that meant the closest Loki could get was yarn made in the place he was from. He got up early one morning in the middle of the week, having found a high-end yarn store in Oslo that he planned on going to. Quietly, he pulled on his boots, then reached for the car keys. It would have been easy enough to open a portal, but he was in the mood for a drive up the coast.

Footsteps creaked upstairs and Loki paused, his fingers hooked through the keychain, before Thor's heavy tread thumped on the stairs. Loki thought about sneaking out before Thor got all the way down, but then he crossed his arms over his chest and waited for his brother to appear.

Thor was rubbing his eyes, but when he caught sight of Loki, he asked, "Where are *you* going? You're normally not up this early."

"Oslo," Loki said. He twirled the keyring around his finger.

"Because?"

"I need to get some yarn."

With a yawn, Thor said, "Talk to Ingrid."

"I need to get yarn from New York City," Loki clarified. "Or, er, New York state. I'm not sure any yarn is actually produced in New York City." He'd ask, though. Maybe there were some sheep wandering around Central Park that he'd never noticed.

Coming the rest of the way down the stairs, Thor grunted, "This is for the thing?"

"The *thing*?" Loki asked, raising both of his eyebrows. "Do you mean my courtship?"

Thor waved a hand. "Yes. That."

Loki's eyebrows stayed up. "Yes, this is for the courtship. I'll see you later." He started to turn around, but then, with a sigh, he looked back to Thor. "Do you want to come?"

Thor looked surprised that Loki had invited him, but a grin spread across his face and he said, "Let me get something to eat."

"Oh, silly me, I thought you were going to say you planned on getting dressed," Loki drawled.

Smirking, Thor said, "If you insist, brother."

Loki didn't dignify that with a response. Honestly, he hadn't expected Thor to look so...thrilled. After all, his brother had made no secret of the fact that he thought this whole thing was foolish; that Loki was better served either telling Stephen he'd marry him, or simply re-posing the question. Loki had been tempted to not keep him apprised of his progress, but then Thor would casually ask, and Loki couldn't *ignore* him.

Well, he could. Actually he was quite good at ignoring Thor when he wanted to be. At least, for ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.

When Thor returned, looking more or less presentable, the two of them went to the car. Loki slid into the driver's seat, Thor into the passenger seat, and they headed out of New Asgard.

The road up the hillside was bumpy and needed work, and Loki had *thought* they'd discussed it already and hired a contractor to take care of it, but that didn't appear to be the case. He'd been somewhat...distracted of late, trying to make sure everything went right for the courtship. About the only thing that had gone right was that Wong had given his permission.

Rather than driving towards the motorway, he turned off to follow the windy coastal road. Thor leaned back in his seat and rolled the window down, slinging an arm out the side. The sun, of course, was long risen, as New Asgard didn't have true night in July. It was a beautiful day. When the sky was clear and blue like this, the sun shining bright over the sea and the verdant grass, it was hard to believe winter could ever come.

"How's it going?" Thor asked.

"What, just generally? Have you fully adopted human turns of phrase, brother?" Loki asked, glancing at Thor with a slight smile on his face.

Thor guffawed. Which was generous. It hadn't been that funny. "You know what I meant. The courtship."

"Swimmingly," Loki replied, keeping his eyes on the road.

"So he hasn't asked you why you're acting so odd?" Thor asked.

Better not to answer that. Scowling, Loki said, "You know, you *could* be supportive. As I recall, I was *nothing* but encouraging when you were courting Jane."

With another laugh, Thor said, "As *I* recall, you repeatedly reminded me that she was too good for me."

"Was I wrong?"

"No."

“Well then.” Loki had a feeling he hadn’t argued his way into a victory, but Thor had the good graces not to say anything else. The two of them were silent as the car rounded a bend in the road. The entire coastline seemed to open up in front of them, the fjord to their right, pastures dotted with linden, oak, and maple to their left. It hardly seemed possible that Loki had once hated it here. Now it was home, as surely as Asgard had been.

As though he could hear Loki’s thoughts, Thor said, “There was a time when you never would have taken the scenic route to Oslo.”

Loki glanced at him. “There was a time when I never would have done *any* of the things I’m doing today. Taking the scenic route is probably the least surprising.”

With a chuckle, Thor said, “You’re probably right. So what’s the *most* surprising? I know what I think.”

Snorting, Loki said, “No doubt you’ll say the fact that I’m doing all this with the aim of marrying a human.” When Thor didn’t say anything, Loki glanced at him. “Or not? Something else?”

Thor thumped his palm on the side of the car. “That’s probably it.”

“Mm.” It obviously wasn’t. But the two of them were beyond the days when Loki would have feared that Thor was thinking something terrible about him. Loki shook his head, smiling a little. “I’m shocked by myself sometimes. Often, actually. I used to think…”

But he trailed off, prompting Thor to ask, “Used to think what?”

Loki navigated a roundabout that wasn’t much more than an intersection with a circle painted in the middle of it. “I think you *know* what I used to think. That this sort of thing wasn’t for me.”

“Marriage?”

Shrugging, Loki said, “Not just marriage. Stephen. I mean, what I have with him. It’s…” Endlessly shocking, utterly unbelievable, astonishingly improbable? He glanced towards Thor again. “I had rather given up on my ability to do something like this.”

“I never did,” Thor said. He reached out and gripped Loki’s shoulder for a moment. “I knew you’d meet the right person.”

“I’m glad one of us thought so.” Loki drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Don’t tell me it didn’t surprise you that the right person was a human.”

With a grin, Thor said, “I won’t say it if you don’t want me to.”

Loki let out a long-suffering sigh, but his mouth twitched into a smile anyway. Some things had a way of feeling inevitable after they’d happened, though in Loki’s experience, things of that nature tended to be unpleasant. Certainly, all of the terrible things that had occurred in his life had felt inexorable even as they were happening. Well yes, Loki, of course you’re really a Frost Giant; yes, of course you can be broken by a power-hungry madman; yes, of course you’ll sacrifice yourself for your brother. That last one hadn’t been as terrible, he supposed. Not that he’d *wanted* to die, but at least his motivations had been good.

But Stephen. Stephen had always had an air of inevitability surrounding him. Each time Loki had tried to walk away, some part of him had kept pulling back, circling around, edging closer. And there was a certain tidiness to the Norns weaving his life this way, he had to admit. His scorn for Thor, who had been fool enough to fall in love with a human, had come right back around and

kicked him in the face, and here he was, head over heels in love with a human himself.

Loki smiled again and Thor patted him on the shoulder once, then withdrew his hand. “Radio?” he asked.

Wrinkling his nose, Loki said, “Fine, but if that horrible Eurovision song comes on, I’m changing the channel.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“It’s *simpering* and I hate it.”

Thor turned the radio on, then leaned back in his seat. “We should send someone to Eurovision. That could be an Asgardian up there with all the confetti and glitter—you could do magic; we’d win for sure.”

Loki scrunched his face up even further. “I’m suddenly regretting every year I’ve spent on Earth, though not as much as I’m regretting every year *you’ve* spent on Earth.”

When Thor laughed, Loki couldn’t help the smile that inched over his face again. How could he help it? His life was...good. And it had been good for a long time. He had his brother, his sister-in-law, a home—and he had a man who loved him, whom he wanted to marry.

That thought allowed trepidation to creep back into his heart, but with effort, he pushed it aside. The day was beautiful. His life was good. He wouldn’t let his anxiety that he was going to ruin all of it get in the way. Just because he’d always ruined everything didn’t mean he would this time.

The drive to Oslo passed pleasantly, though they had a minor spat when the Eurovision song inevitably came on. By the time Thor agreed to change the channel, the song was over, and Loki had been forced to listen to the whole thing anyway. Parking in Oslo was a nightmare, as always, and so expensive that Loki had to close his eyes before he paid. That unpleasantness taken care of, the two of them walked along the street to the yarn shop.

The stares in Oslo were slightly more pronounced than in Tønsberg. There were more tourists, for one thing. But they were still able to make their way unmolested down the sidewalk and to the store.

A bell jingled when they walked in. Loki wanted to walk back out, overwhelmed immediately. Every surface in the store was covered in yarn. Shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, every cubby in them stuffed full of skeins. If there was any organization to the place, Loki couldn’t see it.

“Do they sell Ingrid’s yarn?” Thor asked, his voice hushed, as though they were in some sort of temple.

Loki kept his voice down for a different reason—no employee had appeared, and if he wanted to turn tail and flee, it was easier if they weren’t accosted by a member of staff, or worse, the proprietor. “I don’t know,” he murmured. Gingerly, he poked at a skein of yarn on the nearest table. It was very soft. Loki couldn’t help rubbing it between his fingers. Then, he flipped the tag over. There was a picture of an alpaca, as well as a price sticker. 275 kroner.

The yelp that escaped him was involuntary. It made Thor jump, then demand, “What?”

“Do you see how expensive this is?” Loki hissed.

Giving him a flabbergasted look, Thor said, “So? *I* didn’t tell you to come here. I’ve been telling

you this whole thing is a waste of your time.”

This was hardly the sympathy Loki had been looking for. “And you might as well stop because I’m doing it regardless of how foolish you think it—” A woman appeared from a back room, smiling as she spotted them, and Loki cut himself off.

“God morgen!” she said cheerfully.

“Good morning,” Thor replied, grinning broadly.

Coming closer, the woman said, “Can I help you find something specific?”

Clapping Loki on the shoulder, Thor said, “My brother is looking for a one-of-a-kind yarn. He plans on making something for his *special* someone.”

Loki was going to stab him.

The woman beamed. She was wearing a Nordic sweater that looked handmade, but in a way that bespoke competency and skill. “How sweet!” she said, “What are you making?”

When Loki just glared at Thor, his brother said, “Yes, what *are* you making?”

Through gritted teeth, Loki replied, more to Thor than the shopkeeper, “A sweater.”

While the woman put her hands over her heart, Thor made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a poor attempt to muffle laughter. It would be one thing if Thor was generally mocking the fact that Loki planned on knitting—but that wasn’t it. Thor was mocking Loki because Loki *couldn’t* knit, and because Thor was actually quite good at it. In fact, he’d worked with Ingrid on quite a few of the New Asgardian yarns that *were* sold in shops. It was infuriating that Thor was getting such a kick out of the idea of being better at something than Loki was.

“Well, she’s a *very* lucky woman to have such a sweet boyfriend,” the woman said. “Let’s find the perfect yarn. What’s her favorite color?”

This put Loki in the awkward position of having to correct her while also paying himself a compliment. “Er, he,” he said. When she gave him a confused look, he added, “He’s a lucky man. And his favorite color is green.”

She looked horrified at the faux pas, though he didn’t really care; it wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last, that someone made the assumption that his lover was of the opposite sex. “I’m sorry,” she said, flushing. She looked flustered. Perhaps she’d leave them alone to shop in peace. It was clear that she didn’t know who they were.

No such luck, though. “We’ll find you the perfect thing,” she said, as though she was vowing to slay one of Loki’s mortal enemies. Oh—shit, that reminded him, that was something he was supposed to do, slay one of Stephen’s foes and present their sword to him. How serious a foe did it have to be? He wasn’t all that interested in going after Dormammu, and anyway, he didn’t think Dormammu had a sword...

Before he could demur, she hurried off. Loki could see her picking out every skein of green yarn that she laid eyes on. Beside him, he could practically feel Thor buzzing with amusement at his expense. Through gritted teeth, Loki said, “I’m never inviting you to come anywhere with me again.”

Though he very much wanted to *not* look at Thor, Loki couldn’t help glancing at him. Thor grinned

and said, “Stephen *is* a lucky man, brother.”

“Shut up.”

“He is. How many people would undertake a project of this magnitude, which they had no idea how to actually accomplish, when a simple yes or no answer would have resulted in the same outcome?”

Glaring, Loki said, “You’re never going to let this go, are you?”

Still grinning, Thor said, “If you *had* to get him a sweater, why not just buy him one?”

“It’s *not the same*,” Loki growled.

At that moment, the shopkeeper returned, her arms piled high with yarn. Loki shot Thor one more dirty look before turning a pleasant smile on the woman. She allowed the skeins to spill from her arms onto the table in front of them. It almost seemed that every shade of green imaginable lay before him. If they were all nearly 300 kroner though, he wasn’t sure how he could justify it. How many skeins would he need? Ingrid had given him three.

What was he thinking? This was Stephen. There was no price too great.

“Does he have green eyes?” the shopkeeper asked a little too eagerly.

Loki glanced at her. He rather got the feeling that she was trying to make up for her earlier gaffe. “Sort of,” he replied. “They’re green and blue.”

She gasped. “*Turquoise!* How unusual. He must be quite striking.”

“No, they’re not...” Oh, what did it matter? There was no need to explain to this woman that Stephen had—what did he call it?—heterochromia. He shrugged, then said, “He’s very striking, yes.” Saying so brought on a nearly overwhelming urge to see Stephen, to look into his eyes, to run his fingers over Stephen’s face and beard and through his hair. Loki’s chest ached with longing, but then he shook himself.

“I actually was hoping to find a yarn made in New York,” Loki said. “He’s—er—from New York, and I thought it would be a nice gesture.”

“How long has he lived here?” she asked.

“He doesn’t. I mean, he lives in New York.”

Putting a hand over her heart, she said, “A long distance relationship! Well, I think this is the perfect thing—they can be so hard, but when you both take the time for these gestures, you can get through it.”

“Mm.” There was no point in telling her that they’d been ‘getting through it’ for eight years, with no plans to live permanently together.

Anyway, she was busily sorting through the yarn, pulling out skeins. It was impressive, he had to admit, that she seemed to know their origin by sight alone. When she was done, there was a much smaller selection in front of him.

He snagged a skein in his fingers. It was a rich green color, somewhere between grassy and mossy. “This one,” he said definitively. Steeling himself, he flipped over the tag to read the price. It was

about half what the expensive alpaca yarn had been.

Loki let out a sigh of relief. “I need three of this one,” he said.

Trepidation flashed over her face. “Oh, well—I’m afraid I’ve only got two in stock. I’m supposed to get another shipment in a month.”

Of course. Of *course*.

He could pick out a different yarn. But now he liked *this* one. This was the color that Stephen liked. Everything else on the table now looked too turquoise to him, and he didn’t want *turquoise*. With a frustrated huff of air, he grabbed another skein, which was a similar color, though it wasn’t *quite* the same. “I’ll take this one, as well.”

“This is for...the same sweater?” she asked, her tone delicate.

“I don’t think I’ll need all three,” he said, trying to sound as though he knew what he was talking about. Mirth was radiating off Thor.

She pressed her lips together as though she was trying to physically keep herself from asking the question she wanted to ask. Apparently, she lost the battle, because she said, “Your boyfriend must be very...slight.”

“He’s my size,” Loki said flatly. Not quite, actually. Stephen was both longer-torsoed and broader through the chest and shoulders than Loki was, but this, again, did not seem like information that the woman needed to be privy to.

“I really don’t think three skeins will be enough—”

He held up his phone, the payment app open. “What’s the total?”

There was a look on her face that said nothing so much as, *well, it's your funeral* as she led him to the back of the store. As he paid, she said, “Did you want to look at our patterns? I’m sure there’s something if you’re trying to be economical with yarn—”

“No thank you,” he said.

She bagged the yarn in a canvas sack. When she handed it to him, she said, “You two look so familiar. Have you been in before?”

Perhaps Thor had. But Loki shook his head. “I suppose we both just have those types of faces,” he said, knowing very well they didn’t. It provided him with a little amusement, at least, as he tucked the bag under his arm, turned around, and headed for the door. It was still vaguely tempting to kill Thor, but he restrained himself.

They left the shop, Loki’s shoulders tight, his fingers clenched around the yarn, squeezing it as tightly as he could. He’d been so on edge in there that he’d barely thought about how the yarn itself compared to what he already had from Ingrid, aside from the color. All that talk about Stephen’s eyes; he’d gotten focused on that. Was it even the same...size? He didn’t even know how to talk about yarn. Thor probably did. How irritating.

The two of them walked in silence for a few hundred feet, then Thor glanced at Loki, still looking as though he was trying not to laugh. “I’m sorry, brother,” Thor said, *almost* sounding as though he was telling the truth. “You’re just so serious about this.”

“Because it’s serious to me,” Loki said.

Thor looked at him, and Loki looked back. Then, sounding less amused, Thor said, “I know it is. I’m sorry. Truly. I just never got to tease you about you and Stephen before the two of you became involved.”

“Well, you’re certainly making up for it now.” Loki wasn’t sure he agreed that Thor had *never* teased him, but it certainly could have been worse. With a sigh, he said, “I just want this to go well.”

His expression growing serious, Thor said, “You really want to marry him, don’t you? I don’t understand you. Two months ago, you never talked about marriage. Now it’s all you can think about.”

With a snort, Loki said, “Once I set my mind to something, I’m not easily diverted.”

Sagely, Thor said, “The humans have a saying for that—you can’t see the forest for the trees.”

Giving Thor a withering look, Loki said, “I’m familiar with it. Weren’t you apologizing to me for mocking what should be one of the most joyous occasions of my life?”

“You don’t seem very joyous,” Thor pointed out. “You actually seem to be sweating a lot more these days.”

Loki scowled. But then, he conceded, “Perhaps I should have given it more thought rather than dismissing it out of hand. But the last thing I would have done was propose to him when he didn’t want to get married. The rejection would have been far worse than simply not asking.”

“So like what you did to him,” Thor said.

“I didn’t *reject* Stephen’s proposal,” Loki said.

“Does he agree?”

Loki opened his mouth to respond, then closed it. Of course, he could lie, but he had a feeling Thor would see through him. “We haven’t talked about it,” Loki admitted. “Which is for the best. If we talked about it, he might ask again, and then I’d just have to leave. Again.”

Rolling his eyes, Thor said, “Or you could say yes.”

Loki held up the bag of yarn. “I just spent over three hundred kroner on this. I’m in far too deep at this point to stop. Anyway, if I don’t see this all the way through, I’ll have to take up making hårkullornas for real. I told him there’s been a lot of interest in reviving the craft.”

With a laugh, Thor said, “Well, we definitely don’t want that. Hårkullornas is weird.”

“It’s *so* weird,” Loki lamented. “Stephen looked at me like I was utterly mad—and please do *not* bother telling me he had the right idea. I’m well aware.”

Thor chuckled but didn’t say anything.

As they reached the car and Loki unlocked it, he asked curiously, “What *do* you think is the most surprising thing about today? You never said earlier.”

Resting his hands on the roof of the car, Thor looked at him. An expression crossed his face, an embarrassing sentimentality, a tenderness, almost, that made Loki want to look away. “That you’re

here, Loki. That we're both here, and everything is this good."

Loki's chest tightened. Had they not been on opposite sides of the car, he probably would have thrown his arms around his brother, mortifying or not. Thor wasn't wrong. The fact that the two of them were at this point, both of them alive, both of them happy, had certainly not seemed possible at a certain time.

I'm here, he could have agreed, but he just met Thor's eyes and smiled. To be honest, there was no need to say it out loud.

Chapter End Notes

Thank to everyone reading along with this! Obviously the knitting is going to go *great*. I'd love to know what you think if you want to drop me a comment! ☺

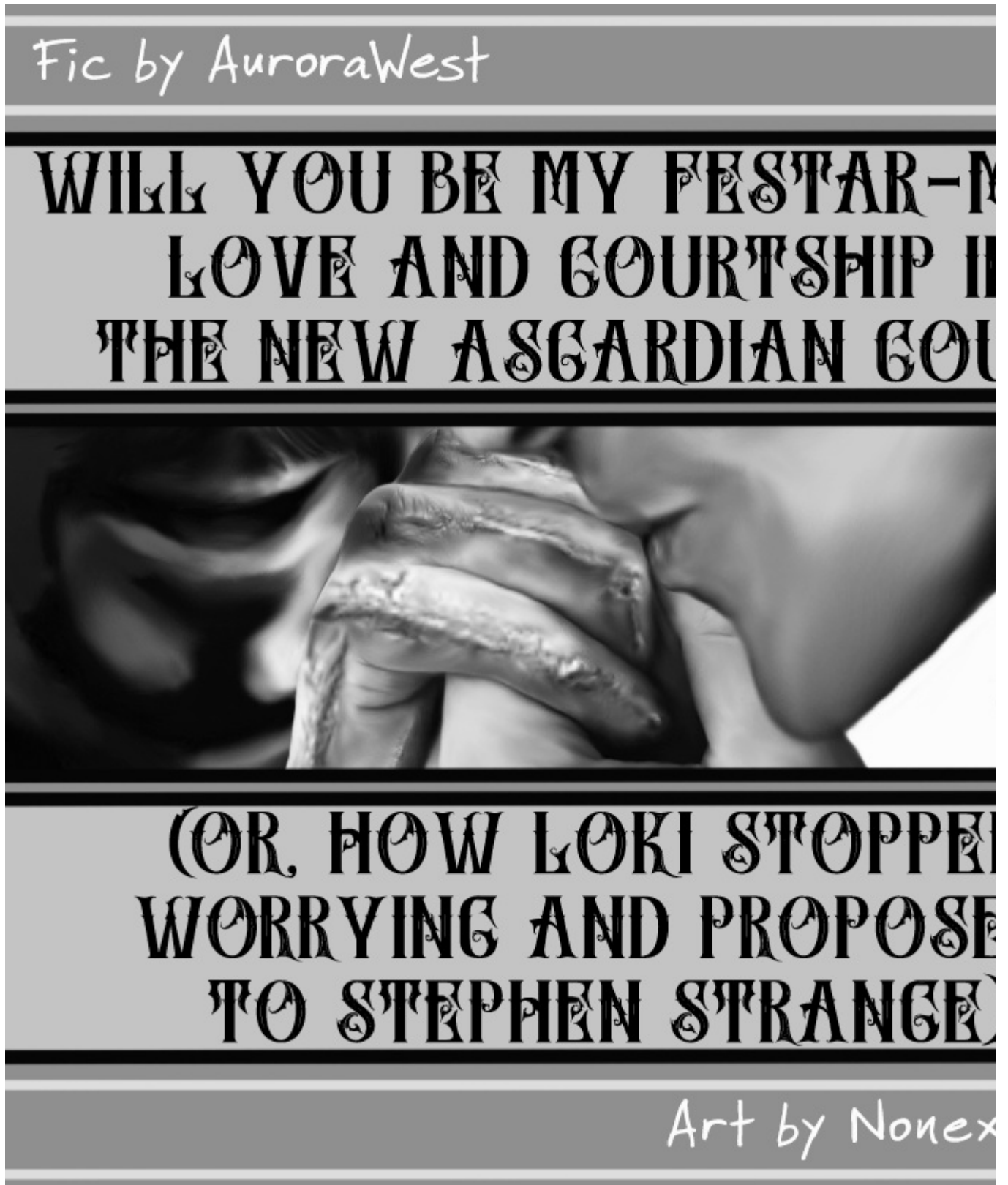
You should also come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! I like to talk about Loki.

Sweater

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



The sweater turned out horribly and Loki didn't need Thor to tell him so—though Thor *did* tell him so. And so did Brunnhilde, who happened to stop by while Loki was finishing it. “It’s called tying

it off,” Thor kept repeating. Unhelpfully.

“I think you should stick to what you’re good at,” Brunnhilde said, eyeing the sweater. Calling it a sweater was actually being quite generous. It was more a shapeless mass of yarn with two tubes attached.

Loki flicked his fingers and the sweater vanished to his pocket dimension. “Well, I can hardly get good at something if I don’t try it, can I?”

She just raised her eyebrows at him.

Wrinkling his nose, he said, “Not that I don’t find your company delightful, Brunnhilde, but I’m going out.”

“Are you going to the Sanctum?” Thor asked, his arms folded over his chest as he leaned against the sofa. When Loki nodded, Thor added, “I hope Stephen likes the sweater.”

“*What?*” Brunnhilde asked, sounding both appalled and thrilled at this piece of information. “You made that for *Strange?*”

Before Loki had a chance to deny this and then disappear, Thor said, “Oh, yes, he’s courting Stephen the traditional Asgardian way.”

The glee in Brunnhilde’s eyes got more wicked. “You’re giving him a *shirt*, huh?”

She wagged her eyebrows and Loki held up a hand. “I’m going now,” he repeated, knowing *exactly* what was coming and not wanting to be present for it.

“Guess we all know what’s happening tonight,” Brunnhilde said, her tone unmistakably lascivious.

With a guffaw, Thor said, “Not much of a mystery with them, to be honest.”

Loki felt himself turning red, but before he could go upstairs to get his sling ring, Jane came down, her hand on the railing. “Wait, what?” she asked. “What does the shirt have to do with *that?*”

As Brunnhilde laughed, Loki put his fingers to his temples. And Brunnhilde, of course, was all too happy to elaborate. “Well, *traditionally*,” she said, “on Asgard, when a woman gave a shirt to a man, if he was into it, he’d put her in his lap, and then they’d...” She made a lewd gesture with her hands. Loki couldn’t believe he owed fealty to this woman. “So what I’m saying, Loki, is that I hope you get lucky.”

“I hope I never see you again,” Loki said.

Jane was biting her lip, clearly trying hard not to laugh. “There’s so much about Asgard that I don’t know.” She glanced at Loki, but apparently the color of his face wasn’t enough to make her stop talking. “What happens if you give someone a shirt who you aren’t interested in just as a well-meaning gift?”

“Yes,” Thor said, also sounding as though nothing this funny had occurred in *years*. “It’s ripe for confusing one’s intentions. You want to be quite sure that a romantic overture was intended before you hoist your would-be paramour onto your lap.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Loki mumbled, slipping past Jane so he could go upstairs. Perhaps he wouldn’t invite any of them to the wedding. That would show them. They would regret mocking him, then.

Or maybe not. Asgardian weddings were lengthy affairs. That was one reason everyone got so drunk; after sitting for so long, watching the pomp and ceremony, it was a relief to start drinking. They might all be happy to not be invited. Fine. He'd find some other way to get back at them. He was good at that.

"Loki!" Thor called as Loki stomped up the stairs.

He almost didn't stop. But, with a sigh, he asked, "What?"

There was no mockery to Thor's tone as he said, "I hope Stephen likes the sweater. Truly, I do."

No one would like this sweater, but Loki was still touched, despite himself. But all he did was make a disgruntled noise and continue to his room, where he could grab his sling ring and go to the Sanctum.

For once, Loki and Stephen went out to dinner. Nothing fancy, of course. Stephen didn't have any money—the sum that his father had left upon his death hardly counted, and anyway, Stephen had put it away in a bank. But there was a Chinese restaurant a few blocks away that they liked. The owners had known Stephen and Wong for years ("Honestly," Stephen said sometimes, "from the sounds of it, Wong single-handedly kept them in business during the Snap, and I don't blame him. The next closest place that does decent egg foo young is practically in the Garment District."), and they always gave Stephen and Loki several extra fortune cookies when they ate in.

Loki obviously didn't put any stock in fortune cookies. They were mass-produced in factories. Half the time they weren't fortunes at all, but simply aphorisms. But when he cracked open his cookie and pulled the fortune out, he paused, staring at it in horror.

"Well," Stephen said, looking at his own fortune, "now I know how to say 'two' and 'table' in Mandarin." He squinted at it. "Actually this is a pretty bad translation." Glancing up at Loki, he said, "What? You look like you got your DOD on yours."

"Er, no," Loki said, though he couldn't stop staring at the little strip of paper. *Don't take things for granted - you can always lose what you love.*

Before Loki could rip it into tiny shreds, Stephen said, "Let me see," and reached across the table, snatching it from Loki. His eyes scanned it and he laughed. "Every so often you get a really ominous one. I'd probably slip them in too if my job was to write fortunes for cookies."

"Yes," Loki said, forcing a laugh.

Stephen glanced up at him, his eyebrows drawing together. "This doesn't actually bother you, does it?"

"Of course not."

"I'm pretty sure there's no one at the cookie factory who has any sight into the future," Stephen added. Despite the innate absurdity of this premise, there was no mockery in Stephen's tone.

Shrugging and trying very hard to come across as though he didn't care a single bit what the stupid fortune said, Loki replied, "I wouldn't think so. There would be better uses for such a gift." Apparently, he wasn't very convincing, because Stephen's forehead was still crinkled, and his toe nudged Loki's under the table. Loki smiled, wishing his false one worked on Stephen. It never had. There had never been any pretending with him.

They paid for dinner and walked back to the Sanctum. The fortune on his mind, Loki reached for Stephen's hand. *Don't get complacent.* Stephen liked holding hands and Loki didn't. Surely this was the definition of not getting complacent? Surely it couldn't be referring to the courtship, and the fact that Stephen didn't know what was happening, because how could he, and he would only grow increasingly confused about Loki's behavior? It couldn't possibly have been implying that he should stop doing this because he might drive Stephen away?

Stephen's hand squeezed his as they walked. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Loki said. When Stephen glanced at him, obviously not believing this, Loki added, "I'm tired, I suppose."

"Haven't you been sleeping well?" Stephen asked, trying, and failing, not to sound concerned.

Snorting, Loki said, "I never sleep well."

Stephen didn't look amused by this in the slightest, but at least he wasn't patronizing about it. If anyone understood insomnia, bad dreams and general twitchiness, it was Stephen.

When they arrived home, they went into the room that Stephen and Wong always called the 'den,' but which Loki simply referred to as the TV room. 'Den' made it sound as though some sort of beast lived there—and granted, Stephen didn't always clean up his dishes, but it wasn't quite bad enough to warrant comparison to an animal.

As they sat down on the sofa, Loki decided he might as well get this over with. "I have something for you," he said.

The befuddled expression on Stephen's face would have been funny if the fortune hadn't still been running through Loki's mind. "Again?" Stephen asked. Was that suspicion in his voice?

"Something useful," Loki said. "I—er—well, maybe it will make up for the other things." *Which were nice; I really appreciated them,* he waited for Stephen to say, but this was not forthcoming. Honestly, could he really expect that? The cake had made Stephen ill, and the hårkullornas had been bizarre. When Stephen continued to look at him, Loki flicked his fingers, and the sweater tumbled out of his pocket dimension.

Before he had a chance to think much about it, he thrust it at Stephen. "Here."

Stephen took it, saying, "Is this a blanket...?"

"It's a shirt," Loki said. "I knit it."

At least the colors looked nice together. And the blue *did* bring out Stephen's eyes, but that was easily the most successful thing about it. The two yarns had not been the same gauge, even though he'd thought they looked the same when he'd bought the green skeins. The blue was heavier, and it made the whole thing look somehow *off*, like he hadn't followed the pattern correctly. Of course, he hadn't followed the pattern correctly, but the different yarns only exacerbated this. The two different greens didn't help, either. The woman at the shop had been right about two skeins not being enough.

He'd *thought* he'd followed the pattern correctly. He'd even asked Thor for help, but when he tried to do what Thor was telling him, it still didn't come out right. Thor had offered to do it for him, but Loki refused. One morning he'd actually caught Thor working on it, and Loki had magically vanished it out of his hands and glared at him until Thor had rolled his eyes and said, "I'm just trying to *help*."

“I have to do it myself,” Loki said, feeling like quite the broken record by this point. He’d had to rip out all the stitches Thor had done. It was easy to tell, because they were all perfect. Loki couldn’t seem to stop missing stitches, doubling stitches up by accident, and still managing to leave ugly, gaping holes when he wasn’t doing either of those things. He’d butchered the Nordic pattern. That should have gone without saying, and yet, he’d messed it up *so* badly that one *had* to say it. It had a drunken feel to it, listing sideways across the sweater in a way that screamed ineptitude rather than stylistic choice.

“You made this?” Stephen asked, sounding flabbergasted.

“Yes,” Loki replied, wincing. He wondered if Stephen actually needed to put it on for it to count as him accepting it.

But after rubbing the yarn between two fingers, Stephen glanced at Loki, then pulled the sweater over his t-shirt without prompting.

It didn’t even fit him. One arm was too long. It was too wide. The neckline was uneven. It was terrible.

“It’s nice,” Stephen said, obviously lying through his teeth. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Loki said, trying for a charming smile, though he had a feeling it simply came across as vaguely nauseated.

They put on a movie, a remake (Stephen called it a ‘reboot’) of something called *Pitch Perfect*. It only half held Loki’s interest, though Stephen insisted the original was good. Though the movie started with both of them sitting up straight, Loki listed further and further to the side, until eventually, he was leaning his full weight against Stephen, sunk halfway down so he was sprawled over the sofa, his head resting in the crook of Stephen’s arm.

During one of the film’s many, *many* musical numbers (“I swear, the music was better in the original, and there was way less of it,” Stephen said more than once), Stephen muted the television.

When Loki looked at him questioningly, Stephen asked, “Are you going to spend the night?” There was a casualness to his tone that belied an unusual uncertainty beneath it. This might have been a first. In all the many years they’d known each other, Stephen had never seemed uncertain about their relationship—or at least, it had happened so infrequently that it might as well have been never. Loki wasn’t sure he cared for it. He was supposed to be the insecure one, not Stephen. And it wasn’t a trait he particularly valued in himself, either.

Tilting his head up from where it was still resting in the crook of Stephen’s arm, Loki asked, “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Loki saw Stephen pick at the sweater, but he didn’t say anything. Not that he needed to, particularly. It was clear he didn’t like it. Perhaps Thor had a point. Perhaps the damn *fortune cookie* had a point. Perhaps these ancient courtship rituals *were* a bad idea. Perhaps they were only making Stephen doubt the strength and depth of Loki’s love for him, when they were intended to show him the opposite.

Loki let his fingers drift across the knobbly sweater and closed his eyes. Perhaps. But he *was* in too deep now, just as he’d told Thor. He’d started this and he was going to finish it. “You want me to

spend the night, yes?" Loki finally asked.

Stephen's fingers tangled in Loki's hair and he raised an eyebrow. "You haven't asked me that question in a long time."

"Well, you seemed like you might—" But Loki cut himself off and straightened up, tilting his head and looking at Stephen, whose eyebrow was still raised, waiting for Loki to continue. With a huff of air, Loki put a hand to Stephen's face, tracing a thumb over his cheekbone.

One of Stephen's arms hooked around Loki's back and he ran his fingers lightly over his spine. "Might what?" Stephen asked, his fingers catching on the hem of Loki's shirt. Fingertips on skin and Stephen's keen, penetrative stare, those lovely eyes of his that Loki could stare at for days.

Without answering, Loki leaned over and kissed Stephen softly, a hand still on his face.

Stephen's mouth opened in return, a slow pull of wanting and need that made heat bloom low in Loki's gut. As Loki's hand drifted from Stephen's face, down to his shoulders, then chest, he made a small noise. It was as helpless as ever. For most of his life, he'd despised the feeling of being out of control. But he'd never been in control of his feelings for Stephen. There had been a time that he'd hated that there was someone who could make him feel that way. Now he knew there would never be anyone else who could, and he loved the fact that he had found the one person who could accomplish it.

Angling himself to get his legs on the couch, Stephen wrapped both his arms around Loki. In between their slow kisses, he said into Loki's mouth, "So that's a yes?"

"That's a yes, Strange," Loki murmured back, slipping his hands under the ridiculous sweater, then nudging Stephen's t-shirt aside with his fingers so he could feel skin under his palms. These days, he took care to warm his hands first, and so he knew Stephen's shudder wasn't because they were cold, but just because of Loki's touch.

There was always a steadiness, an assuredness, to the way Stephen undressed Loki. There had always been something about it that turned Loki on. Aside from the obvious turn-on of your lover taking your clothes off, that was. There was more to it than that, and some part of him that thought perhaps he shouldn't allow a human to be so confident. But how could he not when Stephen kissed him like that, when his fingers moved over Loki's body and all Loki could concentrate on or think about was the two of them pressed together? The promise of skin on skin was intoxicating. The reality was better. Stephen may not have practiced surgery for many years, but his fingers were still capable of a certain kind of precision. He used it to great effect for sex.

Shirts came off and Stephen pushed Loki's pants off his hips, kissing his bare chest, using his tongue in a way that made Loki close his eyes and drop his head, his breath coming quicker. He pressed his face into Stephen's hair until Stephen moved out of reach, following the line of Loki's sternum down his body. "You want to go to bed?" Stephen asked from somewhere in the region of Loki's lower ribs.

"We can stay here," Loki replied, his hips arching to follow Stephen's hands.

With a low laugh, Stephen moved lower, and Loki found himself needing to brace his hands on the arm of the sofa. "Thrill of being discovered, huh?"

"I think—" Loki began, but then had to stop, moaning as Stephen finally got where he'd been going. *I think Wong knows better than to enter a room where we're ostensibly watching a movie* was what he'd been about to say, since the two of them had rarely watched a movie all the way

through without needing to take a—well, a *break*. But it was hard to think at the moment, let alone speak. And anyway, Stephen wasn't in much of a position to have a conversation.

Eventually, Stephen held him closer and Loki could do nothing but dig his fingers into the arm of the sofa, squeeze his eyes shut, and try not to make too much noise. After, he collapsed, legs shaking, on top of Stephen, who grunted and squirmed until they were face to face again.

Stephen pulled Loki's mouth to his, kissing him slowly and deeply. How had it been eight years, when Loki had never managed to figure out Stephen's ability to have this effect on him? How could a human make him feel this way? How could he want one person so much? In the end it didn't matter. Eight years or eight thousand, the way he felt would never change.

They stayed that way for awhile, hands roaming, kissing breathlessly, quiet pants and moans the only sounds in the study (except when Loki opened his pocket dimension without looking to snag a certain well used jar). Flickering light from the muted television flashed over their skin and Loki took every chance to admire Stephen. He was beautiful; so very beautiful.

With something halfway between a groan and a grunt, Loki pushed himself back onto the balls of his feet. The sofa springs protested at the pressure, but if the two of them broke it, well, nothing a little magic couldn't fix.

With a smile that promised truly great things, Stephen sat up and swung his legs off the couch, planting his feet on the floor. Loki stared hungrily, then straddled him. He'd never get bored of Stephen's body, never get bored of this and the way it felt, the fact that he very sentimentally thought of it as magic. The way Stephen loved him often made him want to cry, because he had never imagined that anyone could or would.

He wrapped his arms around Stephen; Stephen put his arms around Loki's back and buried his face in the crook of Loki's neck, and the two of them moved together, skin slick and breath hot, until Stephen shuddered and muffled a moan against Loki's shoulder. There was a pause, and then, without moving his head, he reached a hand between their bodies.

This time, Loki hissed Stephen's name, which made Stephen laugh with delight. When Loki rested his face against the side of Stephen's head, his fingers running through his hair, Stephen added, "Better the second time, I guess?"

"Oh, I don't keep score," Loki replied, his eyes still closed.

Stephen kissed along his shoulder to Loki's collarbone. The feel of Stephen's beard rubbing against his skin made Loki shiver, and he made a noise, tightening his arms. This was comfortable for the moment, though eventually Stephen would probably get tired of Loki's weight on him. Anyway, he supposed they should probably finish the movie.

Running his fingers up and down Loki's back, Stephen said, "Are you okay?"

"Very much so," Loki said into his hair.

"No, I mean—" Stephen pulled away so he could look Loki in the eyes. Tucking a loose piece of hair behind Loki's ear, he said, "Just generally."

This was the second time he'd asked tonight. Loki decided to play dumb. His brow furrowing, he asked, "Why wouldn't I be?"

Stephen didn't say anything and Loki tensed. Not exactly how he wanted his afterglow to be going. But then, Stephen ran his hands over Loki's arms, tracing the contours of his biceps with his

thumbs. “Just making sure,” he said. “At the end of the day, you’re still a space Viking, and I’m just a human. You also have about a thousand years of not really telling anyone when something’s bothering you.”

With a snort, Loki repeated, “*Just* a human? You’ve never thought you’re *just* a human in your entire life.”

A crooked grin pulled at Stephen’s mouth and his hands moved from Loki’s arms to his chest, his palms pressing over Loki’s pecs. “Yeah, well, it seems to be working for me, so probably no reason to quit now, right?”

“You’re so insufferable,” Loki breathed, rocking forward and pulling Stephen’s face towards his to kiss him hard and bite at his lip. Stephen groaned softly and slid his arms around Loki’s back, returning the kiss.

The floor creaked somewhere nearby and they broke apart. Stephen leaned back on the sofa, letting his hands fall to Loki’s hips. “I guess we should maybe find a slightly less compromising position to be in, in case Wong needs to come in here.”

Loki trailed the backs of his fingers from Stephen’s chest down to his stomach, toying with the line of dark hair that led further down. There was quite a bit of gray in it these days. Stephen’s neat beard was peppered with it, too, and the gray at his temples was spreading further through his hair. He glanced up as Stephen reached his arms up, linking his hands behind his own head. When Loki arched a questioning eyebrow, Stephen said, “But I’ll enjoy the view until you move.”

With a slight smile, Loki said, “Likewise.” Self-consciously, he touched his worst scar, which he hadn’t bothered glamoring. Sometimes he still did, depending on how he was feeling. It was ugly, but Stephen had never commented on this fact. Occasionally, he would run his fingers over it, the way Loki did with the scars on Stephen’s hands, and look sad.

Finally, Loki shifted, unfolding his legs and standing up. Biology and gravity resulted in the obvious situation; luckily he had a good supply of tissues in his pocket dimension. He tossed a packet to Stephen, too, who smiled wryly as he tore it open. “Probably have to get the upholstery cleaning people in here again for Wong’s peace of mind,” he said.

Loki bent over to reach for his clothes and paused. The stupid sweater was in a heap with his own sweater and pants. He kicked it aside and picked up Stephen’s t-shirt instead, handing it to him. “I thought none of them would come in here anymore. Didn’t the last ones get attacked by demons?”

Waving a hand, Stephen said, “Yeah, from one of the lesser circles of hell. I had it under control.” When Loki raised his eyebrows, Stephen added, “But I’ll probably have to call someone from Jersey, yeah. No one from the city will take a job here anymore.” He pulled the shirt over his head and stood up. “Next time, we’ll just go to bed.”

“You didn’t fight very hard thirty minutes ago to go to bed,” Loki pointed out.

“Well.” Stephen’s smile was crooked as he took a step forward and slid his hands from Loki’s thighs up over his arse. “You had me at a disadvantage.”

Loki cupped his hands around Stephen’s face. “Turnabout is fair play, Doctor.”

Stephen leaned forward and brushed his lips over Loki’s, pulling their hips together. They were still, it had to be noted, naked from the waist down. And the waist up, in Loki’s case. Speaking of being at a disadvantage.

“Don’t you want to finish the movie?” Loki asked, his voice low.

“Mm.”

This was not an answer, but Stephen’s hands squeezing his backside was. One drifted up Loki’s spine but the other stayed where it was. But then, just as he was leaning in for a deeper kiss, something stopped him. He looked down and Loki followed his gaze. His heel was over one of the sleeves of The Sweater.

Guilt flashed across Stephen’s face and he reached down to pick it up. “I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that you’re *knitting* now,” he said. “But I guess it’s not as...unexpected...as—uh—weaving hair.”

Loki tried to take the sweater from him, but he would have had to rip it out of Stephen’s hands. Doing so would have destroyed it. The symbolism of *that* was horrifying—the threads of their lives, newly knit together, unraveling in both of their hands.

The thought actually made him ill. So he let Stephen take the sweater back. Stephen’s hands ran over it shakily, every stupid knot and missed stitch, every lump and extra row. Every single thing Loki had “crafted” for this courtship had been an unmitigated disaster.

For the barest of seconds, the horrifying urge to cry came over him. He pushed it down before Stephen noticed.

Looking back up to Loki, Stephen said, “Are you bored?”

“What?” Loki asked. “Bored? Why?”

Stephen was rubbing the sweater between two fingers. “The baking, the...hair thing, knitting. You’re picking up and dropping hobbies at a pace that I wouldn’t think was normal for an Asgardian.” Meeting Loki’s eyes, he added, “And I’ve never seen *you*, in particular, go through hobbies like this.”

“Well, technically you haven’t known me that long,” Loki said, trying to sound casual.

Sliding an arm around Loki’s waist, Stephen said, “I know you, Odinson.”

Yes. That had always been very much the problem—and the most wonderful, unexpected thing. “I know,” Loki said, leaning down to kiss Stephen. The sweater, trapped between them, rubbed at his bare stomach and chest as Stephen pulled him closer. It was scratchier than he’d anticipated it would be against bare skin. So there was that, too.

“So what’s going on?” Stephen asked, his voice low as he murmured into Loki’s lips.

Loki shook his head. “Nothing’s going on.”

Time to change tactics. Clearly, if they stayed here and ‘watched the rest of the movie,’ Stephen would keep questioning him. Bed it was, then. Anyway, a certain part of his body was stirring again—another power that Stephen had over him. If they had sex again, Loki could pretend to fall asleep afterwards, and then they wouldn’t have to talk about The Sweater anymore.

Obviously, morning would arrive, and they couldn’t have sex all weekend. Could they? Loki thought about it. The ache between his legs said he might be up for it. Well, they’d cross that bridge when they got there. Tomorrow.

Loki leaned down and caught Stephen's lips in his, kissing him slowly, the suggestion unmistakable. "Let's go to bed," he said. "You have to catch up with me in a certain department."

Stephen smiled crookedly, his hand squeezing Loki's backside again. Circling his other hand, he turned the television off with a wordless spell. Then, he teleported them to bed.

Loki woke before Stephen, as he usually did. Stephen was on his side, Loki on his back, and Loki opened his eyes to look towards Stephen, watching him sleep. His hair was tousled, and also as usual, it took most of Loki's willpower not to run his fingers through it. Stephen had told him before that Loki looked peaceful when he slept, but Loki always scoffed and said *everyone* looked peaceful when they slept. And Stephen would kiss his forehead and give him that smile that meant he disagreed, but wasn't going to argue.

But Stephen looked peaceful, too. The lines in his forehead smoothed when he slept, the wrinkles fanned out at the corners of his eyes and relaxed. There was a weight that Stephen carried that he didn't like to show, much less admit.

As though Loki opening his eyes had created some imperceptible change in the air, Stephen's hand slid over Loki's stomach, his fingers stroking Loki's hip, and Loki shifted over, turning on his side. Stephen's arm pulled Loki tighter and he pressed his face to the back of Loki's neck.

"You're warm," Stephen mumbled.

Loki smiled to himself. "That makes a change."

"Mm." Tightening his arm around Loki, Stephen added, "Warm and...kind of cuddly."

At this, Loki rolled his eyes. "Shut up."

This drew a laugh from Stephen, a breath of air that puffed across the back of Loki's neck as he chuckled. "Just had to see if I could get away with it."

"You should know me better by now," Loki said. Cuddly. *Honestly*.

Though he *did* snuggle closer to Stephen, feeling how their hips fit together, how Stephen's arm curving around Loki's stomach felt like it was meant to be there. Cuddly, no. Obviously not. But he could lie this way with Stephen forever.

He opened his eyes and his gaze fell on a photo on Stephen's bedside table, which made him wrinkle his nose. "I hate this picture," Loki said, reaching out and fingering the frame.

Stephen made a noise and leaned his face against Loki's back, the bridge of his nose resting on Loki's spine. "You remind me of that every few months," he said.

Scooping it off the bedside table to look more closely, Loki said, "Because I continue to hate it." It had been taken at Thor and Jane's wedding—by whom, Loki had never been able to determine. Jane had found it several years ago and given it to him; he had cringed but shown Stephen, who had smiled almost gently and asked, "Is it up for grabs?"

"She said I can have it," Loki had said with a shrug. "I hate it." He was nothing if not consistent.

"Why?" Stephen had asked.

Because the picture showed Loki smiling. Laughing, even. There was uncomplicated joy on his

face and he'd never been able to stand looking at himself like that. He couldn't even remember the moment it been taken, because it could have been any one of a series of moments from that evening. Stephen and he hadn't even been romantically involved—it would be a couple years before that happened—but Stephen had been invited to the wedding, and as the night had worn on, Loki had found himself sitting at a table next to him: a man that he had spent so much time telling himself that he didn't care deeply for that he had almost convinced himself of the lie.

Almost. But not entirely. They had talked for so long that Loki had forgotten to be an arse, which was something he was normally immaculately careful about doing. Not that it had ever made any difference. Stephen had always seen through it. As the other guests had gotten drunker and the dance floor drew more people to it, Loki and Stephen had stayed at a table, watching and talking and laughing together. Their knees had touched under the table and Loki hadn't pulled away and when Stephen had put his trembling hands down near Loki's, Loki hadn't moved. Their hands were in the photo; not quite touching, but separated by the thinnest strip of space imaginable. And Loki was smiling, almost laughing, in a way that he had tried not to allow himself to in those days. He no longer remembered what Stephen had said to provoke this response.

The truth was, he didn't hate the picture at all. It was an easy lie, because it was the *sort* of thing he should hate. This picture showed a truth so plain, so obvious, that it was simply habit to sneer at it. While Loki was smiling, his eyes alight with happiness, Stephen was looking at him, his lips parted slightly, a helpless smile on his face, his eyes fixed on Loki. It was a picture that showed two people in love, before either of them had been ready to admit it. Sometimes, Loki thought it was no wonder Jane had kept it from him. There was no way to look at this picture and not see the obvious.

Loki brushed his fingers over the image of Stephen. "You look so young," he said.

"I *was* young. I mean, *younger*. It's Thor and Jane's ten year anniversary this year."

It was difficult not to feel his stomach ball up in despair. They had so little time together. Stephen was fifty-six years old. He didn't *seem* old, but one day he would, and in the grand scheme of Loki's life, it would be very, very soon.

If he hated this picture, it was because it was a reminder of the time they'd wasted.

Loki felt Stephen kiss his back, then his shoulder, then his neck, before he leaned over to look at the picture. "That was a fun night," he said.

Sliding the picture onto the bedside table, Loki rolled over onto his back to face Stephen, who propped himself up on an elbow. Talking about Thor and Jane's wedding felt like dangerous ground. It felt like a natural time to bring up the possibility of a wedding between the two of *them*. Lying in bed, naked, with the sun streaming in through the window, seemed a much more likely time to be proposed to than in the midst of battle.

Loki hooked an ankle around Stephen's. Then again, maybe it didn't. The heat of battle might, actually, have been the perfect place for a marriage proposal. Wouldn't any Asgardian think so?

"I tried to put it out of my mind," Loki admitted. "Back then."

"Of course you did," Stephen said, rolling his eyes.

"If you'd asked me to dance," Loki said with a slight smile, "I might have ended up kissing you."

With a laugh, Stephen said, "If I'd asked you to dance, you would have said something nasty to me

and walked away.”

Loki’s smile got wider. “Well—yes. Would you have had it any other way?”

“I *have* always loved a challenge.” Stephen drew in a contented breath and stretched, his joints cracking. Then, he slumped over onto Loki’s chest, resting his head on Loki’s sternum and running a hand along his ribs. “I would really love to just not do anything today.”

“Do you have to do anything?” Loki asked. “We could just...stay in bed.”

“God, that’s tempting.” Stephen turned his face into Loki’s chest and kissed his skin. The scratchiness of his beard was nice. A bit of a turn-on. It had been ages since the two of them had spent all day in bed together. His hopes weren’t high. There might not be anything that Stephen technically *needed* to do today, but he wasn’t the type to lie around in bed.

As Stephen’s mouth moved slowly down Loki’s sternum to his stomach, he said, “I have to do some astronomical calculations for Kamar-Taj.”

“And Kamar-Taj can’t do these calculations?” Loki asked, closing his eyes and feeling his hips arch as Stephen’s hands crept lower, finding their way to his pelvis and sliding along the grooves of the bone.

There was a mumble in response, which Loki was in no great hurry to make Stephen repeat more clearly. He liked where this was going—rather, where Stephen’s hands and mouth were going, and he really saw no reason to interrupt or distract him.

But then, Stephen sighed and stopped. Loki opened his eyes in time to see him raise his head. “I volunteered,” Stephen said. At the look Loki gave him, he added, “I want them to be right.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you take this job too seriously?” Loki asked, disgruntled.

“Yeah, you. Like every other week.” Splaying his palm across Loki’s stomach, Stephen said, “You could help me. You’re great at this stuff.”

Loki sat up and took Stephen’s hand in his. It seemed more trembly this morning, and now that he’d noticed that, he thought he could also see a shadow of pain behind Stephen’s eyes. Though he always tried to hide it, Loki had become fairly adept at spotting the days when his hands were bothering him. So he wouldn’t want to stay in bed all day, because he would worry that his hands weren’t up to the task. He would want to get up, distract himself with work, something that didn’t require the use of his hands at all. He might even take a painkiller.

For the fifth or sixth millionth time, Loki wished he could perform healing magic the way his mother had been able to. Er, not for his own benefit and pleasure, in this case, but because on his list of the worst things in the universe, Stephen’s pain was right up at the top.

Taking Stephen’s other hand, Loki took a deep breath and tried anyway, even though it had always been mostly futile. The green of his magic glowed across the backs of his hands, illuminating veins and bone. But as usual, it reached Stephen’s hands and stopped, as though hitting an invisible barrier. A thin stream made it through, but most of it built up, then died away at the surface of Loki’s skin.

Loki sighed in frustration, but Stephen said, “It’s fine. I’m fine. They’re not that bad.”

“Don’t lie to me, Strange,” Loki said, hearing the annoyance in his tone. It wasn’t for Stephen—it was all for him and his inability to do this thing that eluded him time and time again. Thank

goodness performing a healing spell on one's intended wasn't part of the courtship. Loki would fail that part miserably.

Weakly, Stephen squeezed Loki's hands, but he didn't take back what he'd said. "Stick around and help me," Stephen said. "When do you need to get back to New Asgard?"

"Not until tomorrow," Loki replied, stroking the backs of Stephen's hands. It wasn't taking away his pain, but it was the best he could offer. Then, raising an eyebrow, he said, "The only reason I'm good at astronomical calculations, by the way, is because the navigation system went down one too many times on board my ship. I'm not sure if I came by the skill in a mystical enough way to be helping with anything Kamar-Taj needs."

With a chuckle, Stephen said, "Probably not a concern, but if it is, I'll tell them you always meditated before you made the calculations."

Usually he *had* been meditating—meditating on how he could come up with the funds to obtain a ship that didn't break down so frequently. But he snorted and said, "Fine. I'll help."

This reminded him, he had his own calculations to complete. The next part of the courtship ritual needed to occur at a specific time, astronomically speaking. Well, he'd do that tomorrow, once he was at home in New Asgard. For now, he brushed his fingers over the backs of Stephen's hands again, then leaned forward and kissed him. It might not have been a day in bed, but Loki loved working with Stephen nearly as much, putting their minds together to work out a problem. It was something they'd done often enough before they'd been romantically involved. The ease with which they worked together on intellectual puzzles had been a harbinger of how well they worked together in every way.

When Stephen slid out of bed, he pulled the sweater on. Loki didn't know whether to smile or look away. But he reminded himself that Stephen didn't need to *like* the sweater. It didn't need to be *good*. He just needed to accept it. Wearing it, even if only for a day, was acceptance. Right?

Loki couldn't wait until this courtship was over.

Chapter End Notes

The courtship continues to go perfectly, but at least Loki got some XD

Happy holidays everyone! Thank you all for reading along with this fic, and especially those of you who have been so kind as to leave me comments. You've all made a less-than-great year much better! ☺

You should also come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! I like to talk about Loki.

Cleromancy

Chapter by [AuroraWest](#)

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your lovely comments on chapter 7! I'm sorry I haven't been able to respond yet but will asap! In the meantime, I hope to have this entire fic posted before the end of the year, so here's the penultimate chapter ☺

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Fic by AuroraWest

WILL YOU BE MY FESTAR-M LOVE AND COURTSHIP II THE NEW ASGARDIAN COU



(OR, HOW LOKI STOPPED WORRYING AND PROPOSE TO STEPHEN STRANGE)

Art by Nonex

The astronomical calculations Loki and Stephen did together went well. Obviously. They were simple; certainly nothing that a student at Kamar-Taj couldn't have done themselves. Stephen was just a perfectionist who believed in his own ability to do things to a higher standard than anyone else. Even asking Loki to help had just been a way to convince him to stay for the rest of the day. He should have known better—Loki usually didn't require convincing. When Loki did the calculation quickly and easily—it had nothing on some of the hyperspace jumps he'd had to manually calculate—Stephen insisted on doing the whole thing over.

Loki had rolled his eyes, but Stephen's meticulousness was one of the things that Loki loved about

him, so it was difficult to maintain the illusion of annoyance. Unless he *actually* wanted to cast an illusion, but he didn't see the need for that.

Anyway, the point was, when Loki sat down and did the calculations that were required for the courtship on Monday morning, having arrived back in New Asgard the previous afternoon, it was especially egregious when he found out that he'd initially done them wrong.

He sat there, staring at the paper where he'd scribbled the positions of the stars, the sun, and Earth. Had he done it wrong *this* time?

Panic rising in his chest, he ran the equations again. The first time he'd done this had, admittedly, been cursory. There weren't many variables, and he hadn't bothered writing all of it down, because he could do enough of it in his head.

But now he *had* written it down. And when he finished the math again, the same result was staring back at him.

His initial estimate had been wrong. The fourth part of the courtship wasn't supposed to take place next week. It was supposed to take place *yesterday*. Last night, to be exact. And for it to be right, for everything to go the way it was supposed to go, he would need to wait another year.

Loki could do nothing but look at the cramped, messy calculations in front of him. His heart was doing something odd in his chest. It seemed to be slowing to a stop, a heavy, dead stop, and there seemed to be something pushing at his eyes from behind. Oh gods. Oh Norns. The absolute *last* thing he needed to do was cry.

Nevertheless, the equations blurred as tears stung at his eyes. He swiped at his face with a hand, then bit down on the inside of his cheek. No. This was idiotic. He was *not* going to fuck this up, then cry at his own stupidity. He was going to figure this out. He was a master of magic; he had wielded the Mind and Space Stones. His lover was the former keeper of the Time Stone. Loki himself had time traveled. It was a shame he didn't have the Tesseract right now, or this problem would have been easily solved.

He slumped. *That* was the simple solution. Time travel. Unfortunately, he *didn't* have the Space or Time Stones, both of which were long-dead. There was no way to go back to last night.

Loki's spine snapped upright at the thought. *Last night*. He punched the screen on his phone to check the time. It was 8:45 in the morning. And that meant it was 2:45 in the morning in New York. *It was still last night there*.

Without thinking any more about it, Loki bolted to his feet. The next ritual required a piece of wood from the homes of both parties involved. Loki had planned to be a bit more circumspect about what he chose, but there was no time for that. Instead, he grabbed his sling ring and his phone and practically ran to the staircase.

The banister in the Odinsons' house was a beautifully carved masterpiece of Asgardian craftsmanship. One of the survivors of Hela's purge, and then Thanos's, was a woodworker whose creations had long been some of Asgard's most prized. She had made the banister for Loki and Thor once the two of them had settled permanently in New Asgard, finally eschewing the space travel that had occupied them for the previous years. It was priceless, in other words.

It would have to do.

Loki ripped one of the supporting rails from it with a crack, jammed his sling ring on his fingers,

and opened a portal to the Sanctum's foyer.

The Sanctum was completely silent, which wasn't always the case, even at almost three in the morning. Loki strode to the first wooden object he laid eyes on, which was an end table that dated to something-something ancient empire of blah blah blah. Raising a foot, he smashed it in with the heel of his boot. The side of the table splintered under the force of the blow and Loki reached down, snatching one of the long pieces that he'd broken. Then, he cast an illusion over it so that no one would notice, at least for now.

He took the stairs three at a time, managing only to stumble once, and skidded to a stop in front of Stephen's room. There was a sound from Wong's bedroom, on the other side of the balcony that ran around the second level of the foyer, but Loki ignored it, pushing Stephen's door open.

There was a lump on the bed. Good, he was here. There had been a not insignificant possibility that he was out. And somehow, Stephen hadn't woken up, despite the noise of Loki's entry.

"Stephen," Loki hissed. It did nothing. The lump didn't move. Sighing, Loki climbed onto the bed, balancing on his knees as he put a hand to Stephen's shoulder and shook him. It wasn't a particularly gentle shake, but then again, they didn't have time for that. Loki cursed himself again. How could he have miscalculated the days? Why was he so terrible at this?

He shook Stephen harder and was finally rewarded with an unhappy groan. Pressing his advantage, Loki said, "Stephen, get up."

There was an incoherent mumble in response.

More insistently, Loki repeated, "Get *up*, Strange."

"Loki," Stephen said, his voice thick with sleep, "can't we fuck in the morning? You'll be just as horny then, I'm sure."

"That's not what this is about," Loki said. Regrettably. "Just—would you please get up? It's important."

At last, Stephen rolled over, propping himself up on an elbow and rubbing at his eyes with the knuckles of one hand. His hair was sticking up in the back like it usually did when he woke up. The sight made affection tumble through Loki. One of the few secrets he kept from Stephen was that at times he found him endearingly cute, which wasn't something he'd be caught dead saying and probably wasn't something Stephen really wanted to hear.

Doubt flickered through him and he felt his resolve falter. Was this really necessary? Maybe he could slide his hand around the back of Stephen's head, over his messy hair, and kiss every inch of his neck and face until Stephen couldn't resist any longer, forgave him the pushy wake-up, and pulled him in for one of those slow, open-mouthed kisses that always turned Loki to liquid gold.

Maybe it would be fine if this waited until tomorrow night. Maybe the Norns wouldn't care.

The Norns might not care, but Loki would know. And *he* would care.

Anyway, the Norns probably *would* care. Loki had never been one of their favorite people. Or perhaps he was? He'd never been able to quite figure that one out.

And Stephen was looking more awake now, staring at him with two warring facial expressions: like he was wondering where the crisis was, and like he thought Loki might have lost his mind. "What's going on?" Stephen asked.

Loki backed off the bed, standing up and grabbing Stephen by the arm so he could haul him to his feet, ignoring his protestations. Once Stephen was standing, Loki grabbed some clothes and flung them at him. “Get dressed.”

“What the hell is going on?” Stephen repeated, his voice muffled by the shirt that had just hit him in the face. “And why are you holding a—what is that? A club?”

Glancing down at his hand, Loki realized he was still holding both the piece of his banister and the long, thin piece of wood from the table downstairs. He vanished both into his pocket dimension and said, “What are you talking about?”

When Stephen pulled the shirt away from his face, Loki was holding up his hands, palms out, so that Stephen could see they were empty. There was a supremely unconvinced expression on Stephen’s face. “You were holding something.”

“Well, sometimes I forget what’s in my hands,” Loki said breezily. “Come on, I want to go for a walk.”

“A *walk*?” Stephen said incredulously. “What time is it?”

In about two seconds, Loki was going to pull that shirt over Stephen’s head himself. The pants might prove more difficult, but he could glamor something to avoid an indecent exposure citation. “It’s a nice night,” Loki said. He needed to come up with a plausible reason for this sudden compulsion to take a stroll at three in the morning. “I was bored,” he said, trying to imbue this with enough *oh-Loki-you’re-so-unpredictable* to be charming instead of absurd and obnoxious.

Stephen looked at him and Loki held very still. Annoyingly, Thor’s voice echoed in his mind at that moment. *Just tell him you want to marry him.* Norns, this would have been so much easier if Stephen understood what was happening, if he didn’t think he was watching Loki pick up an increasing number of hobbies and whims. Loki wouldn’t have traded Stephen’s humanity for anything—that humanity was what had made Loki fall in love with him—but he was *really* wishing at the moment that this particular cultural touchstone was common to both of them: that Stephen would know he was being courted, officially speaking, by a prince of Asgard, and that he would act accordingly.

That was the thing. If Loki told him what was going on, Stephen wouldn’t sit back and allow himself to be courted. He’d say, “Okay, so, you *do* want to marry me? Let’s get married.” And Loki simply couldn’t have that.

There was another pause, and then, with a sigh, Stephen got dressed. Loki felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. Good. Good. As long as they did this before the sun came up, as long as the proper constellations were still overhead in their proper configuration, it would all be alright.

Of course, Loki was now trapped into actually *walking* to where they needed to go. Ideally, he would have just opened a portal to the Hudson to save time. So he was fidgeting as Stephen seemed to take longer getting dressed than he ever had in his life. “Are you ready?” Loki asked.

After the third time, Stephen said, “Yeah, yeah, okay, I’m ready. Christ, Odinson. What’s the rush?” He yawned and Loki quickly opened a portal with his sling ring to the street outside, grabbing Stephen’s hand and pulling him through before he could object.

They emerged on the front stoop and Loki tugged on Stephen’s hand. “Come on.”

“Are you feeling okay?” Stephen asked, disentangling his hand from Loki’s.

If he stopped walking, they risked not starting again. So Loki didn't, instead turning around to walk backwards. Stephen would have to follow him if he wanted an answer to this question, which was, truthfully, a resounding *no*. He actually felt a bit feverish. But of course, he smiled and said, "Yes. Obviously. I'm just—"

What? What was he just?

"—I was just bored," Loki repeated. Best to stick to the same story. This would be annoying, but not particularly out of character. He *did* get bored, and occasionally that meant arriving at the Sanctum at odd hours. Usually not *quite* this odd of an hour, but it was a plausible thing for him to do.

Stephen didn't look entirely convinced. Loki supposed it probably had something to do with his general twitchiness and the timbre of his voice, which was a tad higher than it normally would be. Still, he sighed and walked after Loki, who tried not to look too relieved. Relief would be a clear sign that he was lying about something. Well, it wasn't lying. Not really. It was just...not telling the whole truth. But it was about something good for once. Did that even count as lying?

Loki walked quickly. Stephen didn't grumble too much. They didn't talk. It wasn't until they reached Rockefeller Park that Loki slowed his pace. Stephen had to catch his breath. Perhaps that was the reason he hadn't really spoken as they'd walked.

Still breathing heavily, Stephen said, "*This* was what was so important that you had to wake me up at three in the morning? You wanted to come down to Rockefeller Park to get mugged?"

"Mugged," Loki scoffed. "You're the Sorcerer Supreme and I'm the most powerful sorcerer in the Nine Realms. Unless Dormammu or Karnilla are hanging around, I hardly think there's anything to worry about."

Stephen looked at him and Loki looked back. It took a second, but Stephen rolled his eyes and smiled a little. "What's going on, Loki?" he asked.

"Nothing," Loki said, putting a hand on Stephen's shoulder and steering him towards the railing that overlooked the river. The water looked dark and calm, though he knew the current was swift. Lights from Tribeca behind them and Hoboken, on the other side of the river, reflected on the river's surface.

Stephen put his hands on the railing and Loki glanced at them, his eyes tracing the scars on the back of Stephen's hands. It made him want to run his fingers over them, but something stopped him. This wasn't an argument they were having right now. But things felt...off. And Loki knew there was no one to blame for that but himself. Which was the case for most things in his life, really.

Which meant that the sooner he got through this courtship, the sooner he proposed to Stephen, the better.

With a flick of his wrist, he pulled the two pieces of wood from his pocket dimension. Shoving the one from the Sanctum towards Stephen, Loki said, "Here. Take this."

"What?" Stephen asked, though he was startled enough that he did it. Once it was in his hands, he looked at it. "What the hell is this?" Squinting, he asked, "This looks like a piece of that Ottoman table in the foyer."

"Hm," Loki said, arranging his face into something that looked vaguely confused, but

noncommittal enough that he had plausible deniability if Stephen said he'd lied about where the piece of wood had come from.

It didn't stop Stephen from giving him a penetrating look. "You're acting really, *really* weird," Stephen said, his fingers shaking around the piece of wood.

"You know me," Loki said. Yes. Stephen *did* know him. Stephen was well aware of what typical Loki-weirdness looked like, and this wasn't it. Before Stephen had a chance to pursue this statement, Loki brandished the piece of the railing from his own house and said, "I just need you to throw *that*—" He thwacked the rail against the piece of Ottoman table, "—into the river."

"What?"

Had the situation not been what it was, Loki might have pointed out that Stephen was beginning to sound very repetitive. Unfortunately, the situation *was* what it was, and Loki had no answer to offer, except the truth, and he'd already decided he couldn't tell the truth. Not yet. He'd gotten this far into this courtship, and it was far too late to back out now. Was this simple stubbornness? Possibly. But no one had ever told him he *wasn't* stubborn.

"Can you just do it?" Loki asked, knowing he sounded helpless. If he'd had the additional week that he'd *thought* he had for this, he would have come up with something clever and convincing. Perhaps he would have glamored the wood. No, that didn't seem above board. Well, he would have done *something* so that he wasn't reduced to sounding like a lunatic, standing in a dark, deserted park at three-thirty in the morning, trying to get his boyfriend to toss a piece of wood into the Hudson.

And *that* was truly a sign of his agitation. *Boyfriend*. He never called Stephen his boyfriend.

Stephen opened his mouth, no doubt to object, but then his eyes searched Loki's face and he sighed. "You're not going to tell me what this is about, are you?" he asked, sounding resigned.

No. But it was probably asking too much of Stephen not to give *some* kind of explanation. "It's... an Asgardian tradition," Loki said cagily. "Related to...soothsaying."

This wasn't *entirely* untrue. The point of the ritual *was* to foretell the future of a marriage. If the two pieces of wood caught the same current and flowed down the river together, that foretold a relationship destined for harmony, for sailing the path of life together. If they caught different currents but still flowed downstream, that wasn't quite as promising.

If one or both of the pieces of wood got hung up on something, some obstruction in the river, then that, obviously, was a very bad sign.

Loki waited, his eyebrows drawn together, knowing he looked pleading. And at this explanation, such as it was, something entered Stephen's eyes, something that looked almost like concern. His lips parted, but then closed again. "Okay," he said quietly.

Something cold wormed through Loki's chest. It wasn't possible that his behavior could drive Stephen away.

Was it?

What if Stephen did the thing, right now, that Loki had always been afraid he would do? What if he took a step back, said, *This has been a huge mistake*, and ended things? Stephen had been part of his life now for fifteen years. It wasn't much, not in the grand scheme of things. And yet, it was everything. His life without Stephen was unimaginable.

Looking back towards the river, Stephen drew back his arm and let the piece of wood fly. It landed in the water about fifteen feet away, pointing downstream. That was good, if Loki was remembering correctly. He tossed his as well and it landed right next to Stephen's with a flat smacking sound.

Neither of them spoke, Loki because he was too intent on watching what happened with the sticks, and Stephen because—

Stephen was looking around at the park, the fingers of one hand drumming on the metal railing. He wasn't watching the sticks at all, and Loki didn't know how he could make him without worsening this situation.

The two pieces of wood knocked together as they moved downriver. All was well. It actually couldn't be going much better than it was.

Then, his breath caught. Rather than moving out into the center of the channel, both pieces of wood caught in an eddy of water and moved closer to shore, heading straight for the dock for the Battery Park City ferry. His heart picking up, Loki moved down the railing, keeping his eyes on the two sticks. As they got closer to the dock, he walked faster, practically breaking into a run to get to the other side. Would they both make it under the dock? Would one get caught? Would they both get caught? Loki wondered which was better and decided if their life together was going to get hung up on something, he would rather it was together, rather than one of them continuing on without the other.

Queasiness coiled through his gut. That was going to happen. That was *guaranteed* to happen, regardless of anything else. Loki would go on without Stephen. It was unimaginable, but it was unavoidable. They had so little time together.

In light of that, it was hard to escape the feeling that he was wasting that time.

Loki moved his eyes from the river to look at Stephen, who was following him at a distance, looking exasperated, confused, and...something else. Was it unhappiness? Stephen was so patient, so very patient, and it was almost certainly the reason he was able to put up with Loki. Perhaps this was pushing the limits of that patience too far, though. Perhaps Stephen had just realized his patience wasn't endless.

When Stephen reached his side, Loki swallowed. Had this all been a terrible mistake?

The certainty that it had been, that he should have just said *yes* to begin with, seized him.

"Stephen," he said urgently. If it had been a mistake, it was one that was in his power to rectify immediately. "Stephen, I have to ask you something."

Stephen's eyebrows drew together, but he didn't say anything. Loki sucked in a breath and opened his mouth. "Will you—"

But at that moment, the sticks emerged from beneath the dock, side by side. Before Loki could get his proposal out, he clamped his mouth shut. Though he had never been one to put much stock in signs and soothsaying, it was hard to ignore this one. The two pieces of wood matched each other exactly, moving together as though one. If that wasn't a sign that he was supposed to be going through this courtship the way he had been, then he didn't know what was.

A smile broke out on his face as he watched the two sticks move down the river, until they disappeared into the darkness.

Stephen cleared his throat and Loki jumped. “Will I what?” he asked. The flatness of his tone was a reminder that he had no idea what had just happened.

Possible endings to this question flashed through Loki’s mind, besides the one he’d been planning on. Nothing came to him. So he shook his head and said, “Never mind. It isn’t important.”

“But this *was*?” Stephen asked, sounding distinctly aggrieved. Loki shrugged and Stephen let out a frustrated sigh. He didn’t ask what the ritual had foretold, which surprised Loki. Didn’t he care? The answer was obvious in the way he wouldn’t meet Loki’s eyes. “Are you ready to go yet?” Stephen asked. The irritation in his voice had gone. Now he sounded...weary.

All the relief Loki had felt at the successful completion of the ritual fled, leaving the moment feeling gray and dark. “Er, yes,” he said.

Stephen’s lips thinned and he looked at Loki in a way that made Loki nervous, though he couldn’t see beyond the blue of Stephen’s eyes to work out what he was thinking. In the halogen circles from the lights overhead, they looked almost crystal—and was it Loki’s imagination, or were they just as hard? As Stephen turned away, Loki grimaced and followed him from the park.

They didn’t speak as they walked home, their pace slower now that Loki had accomplished what he’d come here to accomplish. When they reached the Sanctum, Loki said, “I suppose I’ll go back to New Asgard. I was working on some things.”

“Okay,” Stephen said. Loki’s heart fell. He’d hoped Stephen would object to this and ask him to stay. But there was just a long, heavy silence. Stephen kept looking at him, as though he was waiting for something, but Loki didn’t know what it was. For the first time in ages, Stephen felt walled off to him. Years ago, he had taken care to make his emotions as opaque as possible. He no longer did, not with Loki. Seeing him this way again wasn’t a nice feeling.

Stephen raised a hand to Loki’s face and ran his thumb over Loki’s cheek, then leaned in to kiss him. “Good-night,” he said before turning away, then disappearing as he teleported back into the Sanctum.

Loki stood outside the front door, something in him slowly splintering. With a hard swallow, he pulled his sling ring from his pocket, opened a portal, and returned to New Asgard.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Loki. You have no one to blame but yourself.

As always, I hope you're all continuing to enjoy this! Thank you so much for reading and commenting.

Come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! I like to talk about Loki.

Proposal, Again

Chapter Notes

Here we are...the final chapter. Will Loki make this right? Will Stephen break up with him??!

Thanks again to [mareebird](#) for her wonderful beta work!

This chapter includes [Nonexistenz's](#) absolutely *incredible* art. I'm so lucky to have gotten the opportunity to claim one of her pieces for this bang—and she drew an additional beautiful piece! Guys, I kid you not when I say I was screaming when I saw the finished products. She's an amazing artist; you'll see what I mean when you see the art.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Fic by AuroraWest

WILL YOU BE MY FESTAR-M LOVE AND COURTSHIP II THE NEW ASGARDIAN COU



(OR, HOW LOKI STOPPED WORRYING AND PROPOSE TO STEPHEN STRANGE)

Art by Nonex

“Loki, why is there a goat tied up outside?”

Loki’s eyes didn’t move from where they were fixed, which was on the blade of his knife as he sharpened it. This wasn’t technically *because of* the goat—his knife just needed sharpening—but the goat was going to eventually be the beneficiary of it. Perhaps beneficiary wasn’t the right word, though Loki’s forebears would have thought so. Victim was a better word. There was a reason Loki was mostly a vegetarian. New Asgard raised far too much of its own livestock and Loki had too great a hand in all of it. He liked animals. It was something he enjoyed, being around them, and he had since he was a child. He didn’t like slaughtering or eating the animals that he’d

raised.

“You know why there’s a goat tied up outside,” he replied tonelessly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Thor staring at him.

Loki laid his knife on the table and put his head in his hands. His elbows stung as he pressed them into the tabletop. “I have to, Thor. Do you think I want to? But I *have* to. I’ve come this far.”

“That’s *Billie*,” Thor said, sounding horrified. The impending death of any of New Asgard’s goats would have garnered this reaction, but Thor had always had an especially soft spot for Billie, who preferred grazing in their yard above all others in the village.

And that was the problem. For the next part of the courtship, Loki had to offer a goat to Stephen. But it couldn’t be just any goat. It had to be a prized animal. If this particularly beloved goat had produced sub-par milk, or too little of it, or offspring that they couldn’t sell to other farmers, that would have been one thing. But Billie was good at all those things. So Loki would offer her to Stephen, and if he accepted the proposal, then Billie would be the main course at their wedding feast.

“What about *Nibbles*?” Thor demanded, sounding even more aghast. “Nibbles is too young to be on his own!”

“Thor, you’re not helping!” Loki snapped. Bringing up Billie’s kid was a low blow.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Thor said, “I’ve tried to help, Loki. But you’re going too far. Billie is off the table.”

Wrong. Billie was going to be *on* the table. Loki was no happier about it than Thor.

“What’s next?” Thor asked. “Don’t tell me you’re going to slay one of Stephen’s enemies?” When Loki pursed his lips and remained silent, Thor rolled his eyes so hard that Loki couldn’t help thinking that he had some competition in that department. “So you’re going to risk your life when you could just *propose to him*?”

Spinning his knife idly on the table, Loki said, “I wasn’t going to choose a particularly dangerous foe.”

“Oh, who were you going to choose, the man at the deli who he says purposefully makes his sandwiches wrong?”

“That...was a possibility,” Loki said, not willing to admit that so far, he’d given it almost no thought at all. This courtship had become very one-thing-at-a-time. It was the only way he could get through it. He supposed if it came to that, the man had that little knife that he used to spread mayonnaise on the bread. That was a blade that he could present to Stephen. Sort of. In a technical sense.

To be honest, slaying one of Stephen’s enemies was going to be much easier than slaughtering Billie.

“You can’t do it,” Thor said, a note of finality in his voice. It was the voice he used to make people do what he wanted them to do, which he was, admittedly, good at, but which unfortunately would not, and could not, do anything to move Loki from this path. Then, as though grasping at straws, Thor added, “You don’t even have a ring yet!”

Thinning his lips, Loki reached into his pocket dimension and pulled out a box, holding it up so Thor could see it before he flicked it open with his thumb. “The ring was the first thing I had made,” Loki said. “The first morning after Stephen proposed to me.” He couldn’t risk leaving something so important to the last minute.

He glanced at it. The ring was simple, a thin band of gold with no markings on the outside. On the inside, he’d had the rune for *love* engraved. There was a wedding ring as well, which Loki would magically bind with this one once it was on Stephen’s finger.

Once it was on Stephen’s finger. That moment seemed so far away. It seemed farther away now that it had at any other time during this entire courtship. The two of them hadn’t seen each other since the stick incident. They had texted, video chatted once, but Stephen had been busy—legitimately, but even so, Loki couldn’t help but wonder if perhaps he was keeping himself a *bit* busier than he needed to.

Thor stared at the ring, then met Loki’s eyes. He opened his mouth, but he must have seen something in Loki’s face that stopped him from speaking. This wasn’t particularly surprising. Loki was making no attempt to hide his dismay at how this situation had spiraled out of control. If it had been going well, he might not have felt so sick over sacrificing his favorite goat in the village to his eventual wedding feast. But it *wasn’t* going well. Loki had a feeling that Stephen was regretting that he’d proposed in the first place a month ago. He was probably *grateful* that Loki hadn’t said anything.

“The ring is nice,” Thor said.

Snapping the box shut, Loki said, “Thanks.”

There was a silence. Loki spun his knife again, putting the ring box down on the table. As he rested his head on his hand, Thor sat down across from him and said, “Something’s bothering you.”

“That’s very observant of you, brother.”

Thor looked at him.

What was Loki supposed to say? *You were right*? Because that, he was afraid, was the only thing he *could* say. Thor had been right, and Loki had been wrong, and he was...well, *destroying* his relationship with Stephen seemed a bit melodramatic. But then again, Loki *was* a bit melodramatic.

“I just want this to be over,” Loki said. “I just want him to say yes.”

Thor sighed and rested his arms on the table, holding Loki’s eyes. “Then ask him.”

Rubbing at his temple, Loki said, “I’m going to.”

Thor looked relieved. “Good.”

“After I give him the goat and present him with the sword of one of his enemies,” Loki said, knowing how exhausted he sounded. Over the sound of Thor’s exasperated protestation that none of this was necessary, Loki said, “I’m going now.”

“You’re *actually* going to take Billie,” Thor said. Marvelous, now he sounded aghast again.

Loki’s jaw moved to the side and he didn’t answer, vanishing his knife and the ring back to his pocket dimension, then marching outside and untying the goat’s rope from where he’d looped it around a stake in the ground. Billie looked at him placidly, trust in her eyes. She’d look at him the

same way before he slaughtered her, no doubt—

No. *Stop*. He reached out and scratched her head, and she butted her nose into his hand. It made him feel ill, but he opened a portal to the Sanctum's foyer, tugged on the rope, and led her through. She didn't even hesitate. That made it worse.

Her hoofs clopped on the floor and he closed the portal behind them. The Sanctum was quiet, but after a second, Wong appeared on the second level. He took one look at Loki, then at the goat, then swiveled right back around into the room he'd come from, calling, "Stephen, you have a visitor."

There was a whoosh, then Stephen was standing in front of Loki. There was a flash of happiness in his eyes. The goat let out a bleat. Stephen looked down, his gaze fell on her, and the expression on his face became rather less happy.

He stared. "Why do you have a goat?"

"Her name is Billie," Loki said, trying not to think of the trusting way she'd looked at him as he'd led her through the portal.

The expression on Stephen's face was hard to read. It looked like he might be getting ready to tear his hair out. "Billie," he said, his voice tight. "Like the Three Billy Goats Gruff?"

"No, like Billie Holiday, actually, I thought you'd appreciate the reference." Not that Billie was going to be around much longer for anyone to appreciate the pun. Jane had named her, but Loki had laughed and said it was a good idea.

Stephen pressed his lips together and narrowed his eyes. "Loki. Why. Do you have. A goat."

"She's for you," Loki said, holding the rope out. Stephen didn't take it. "It's a gift?" he tried.

"Why?" Stephen asked. "What am I going to do with a goat?"

"Er."

But this question turned out to be rhetorical. "What would possess you to *give* me a goat?" Stephen demanded. "The cake, and the sweater, and the...hair thing...which I found under my pillow last night, but we can talk about that later...that was weird, but at least those are like, gifts. Actual, real, gifts that people get for each other." His voice was getting tighter. "*Livestock* is not something you get for someone who lives in a brownstone in the West Village! I know something weird is going on. Can you please just tell me what it is?"

Billie started wandering away and Loki dropped the rope, letting her go. "I can't," Loki said, not knowing what else to say. "You just have to trust me."

"Trust you on *what*?" Stephen asked. "I've been trying to figure out what's going on with you. I've asked you if you're okay. And you keep brushing me off and insisting everything's fine when it's not! I'm not an idiot, Loki!"

"Obviously," Loki said, wincing.

"Yeah, well, you seem to think I am, because you won't just come out and say what's bothering you!"

Loki opened his mouth to say something, though he wasn't sure what it was going to be. But before he had the chance, Stephen said, "And okay, sure, at first, I didn't really get it, but you couldn't

have been more clear. All the different hobbies, the divination thing last week—you said you weren't bored, and maybe you think you aren't. Or I don't know, maybe you don't want to hurt my feelings. But you're obviously getting restless and looking for something. What did the thing with the sticks tell you, anyway?"

Well, at least his glamor on the table seemed to be keeping Stephen fooled for now.

Loki swallowed, grasping for something to say that would fix this, but which also wouldn't reveal what he was trying to do, because he wasn't done with this, he still had one more task, and then, *and then*, he could finally propose. "I'm not bored, I told you that," Loki said. "And the sticks, it was...it was a good thing."

"A good thing for who? For *what*?" Stephen asked. He ran both his hands through his hair, then dropped them to his sides, a resigned expression on his face. "Look, I get it, okay? I get that I shouldn't have asked you. But you know what, Loki? If you didn't want to marry me, why didn't you just *say* something?"

Loki gaped soundlessly. What? Stephen thought Loki was looking for a way out of this relationship because of the marriage proposal? *Stephen's* marriage proposal?

This had entirely blown up in his face. All of the effort, all of the time and stress and anxiety, and all he'd done was convince Stephen of exactly the opposite of what he'd intended to. Stephen thought he was *bored*. Stephen thought Loki didn't want to be with him. How did he salvage this? What could he say? How did he deny it but not deny it?

He opened his mouth to say something, which would be the right thing to accomplish all of the above, even though he hadn't quite figured out what it was going to be yet. But what came out was, "I *do* want to marry you, that's the whole *point* of all of this!"

There was a silence.

Well, not a silence, completely. Billie crunched down on a book as Stephen stared at Loki. His eyes were wide.

"Are you serious?" Stephen finally asked.

"Yes," Loki said, misery creeping into his tone. "Of course I do. I just wanted to do it properly; I'm Asgardian, I'm a prince, the last thing I wanted was a *human* proposal—er—" Since Stephen's eyebrows had gone up, Loki added, "Not that there's anything wrong with humans, clearly. I just..." Running a hand through his hair in frustration, he said, "I wanted to... You always said we didn't need to get married, and I was fine with that. But then you *asked* and I couldn't just accept, I —"

His eyebrows still raised high, Stephen said, "You had to dig up a bunch of Asgardian rituals to do what a simple question can accomplish?"

Loki licked his lips and swallowed. "Courtship was very important on Asgard," he said. "It was never only about marrying for love, it's a binding, a partnership. It's not just two people, it's their families as well. Especially for someone like me, my fidelity, my commitment, is paramount, and I —" He was talking too fast. Drawing in a deep breath, he said, "So much of Asgard is gone. I don't want to forget who I am and where I came from. I know it all seems pointless and ridiculous to you, but this is what I grew up with. It's important to me."

He stopped and tilted his head up to look at the ceiling, feeling ill. After all they'd been through, it

had been his pathetic attempt at romance and sentimentality that would break them apart.

The bell on Billie's collar jingled. Stephen said, "Odinson." When Loki looked at him, his lips pressed together, Stephen smiled a little, a crooked pull to his mouth that made Loki's heart hurt. "So you *do* want to marry me."

If Stephen would still have him. There had been many things in Loki's life that he'd wanted, and he'd been lucky enough to get some of them. Stephen Strange was near the top of that list. Marriage wasn't necessary, but...

Norns, yes. He wanted it.

So perhaps there was a middle ground between Stephen asking him and Loki doing things the old fashioned way. He'd done his best. He'd courted Stephen. And they'd been together for eight years, and circling each other long before that. If that wasn't an appropriate courtship by the Norns' standards, well...well, then to be honest, Loki just wasn't going to think about it. It *was* important. But it wasn't more important than what was in front of him.

He closed the distance between himself and Stephen and took Stephen's hand. For a moment, he stared at it, running his thumb over the scars. He'd always found Stephen's scars beautiful, in their way—what they stood for, and the fact that he wore his damage so outwardly, when Loki had always been terrified to show so much as a hint of his. Stephen's bravery manifested itself in so many ways; he was, bar none, the bravest man that Loki had ever known. But sometimes he thought Stephen had been too brave to take a chance on Loki, to believe in him all these years.

His eyes flicked up to meet Stephen's. He had the most beautiful eyes, the kind of eyes you could stare at for a lifetime and never tire of getting lost in.

Loki drew in a slow breath. "Stephen Strange, will you marry me?"

There was a jingling, and then the sound of hoofs clopping on the stairs. Billie was headed up to the second, or possibly third floor. She *had* shown a taste for books—the library was her best bet for more food.

The two of them watched her, then turned back to each other. There was a smile forming on Stephen's face, an irrepressible happiness in the crookedness of it, and Loki felt his heart ease and his jangling nerves calm. "Yeah," Stephen said. "Yes. Is there some kind of traditional Asgardian thing I should say?"

Loki could do nothing but stare at him, warmth filling him. Then, swallowing hard again, he lifted Stephen's fingers to his mouth and kissed them, squeezing his eyes shut. There was a smile fighting to spread across his face, a huge, joyful, stupid grin, and he pressed his lips harder against Stephen's fingers. "*Yes* works fine," Loki said, Stephen's skin warm against his mouth.



“Okay, good.” Before Loki knew what was happening, Stephen’s other hand was on the side of his face. His palms were trembling, but they were warm. They felt like home. Then, Stephen pulled him into a fierce kiss, both hands in Loki’s hair. Loki wrapped his arms around Stephen’s back, making a noise as he opened his mouth to Stephen’s kiss. Something bright and buoyant rose up in Loki’s chest, filling his lungs and his heart, and he didn’t know if he was going to laugh or cry, so he just kissed Stephen harder.

They pulled apart, Stephen’s hands still on Loki’s face. “Yes,” Stephen repeated, his voice thick with emotion.

Suddenly, Loki’s eyes widened. “Oh—shit.” For heaven’s sake, could he really get *no* part of this right—this was ridiculous—

Flicking his fingers, he opened his pocket dimension and snagged the ring box. This really *was* supposed to come after he slew one of Stephen’s enemies and laid their sword—and head, if possible—at his feet, but well, the proposal was supposed to come after that too, and he’d already messed up every part of this, and anyway Stephen had said yes, *Stephen had said yes*, so what did it matter?

He took Stephen’s hands in his, squeezing them, before opening the box to reveal the engagement ring. Stephen stared at it, his throat bobbing, before he laughed.

Which brought Loki up short. He almost closed the box. “What?” Loki asked.

“No, it’s just—” Stephen laughed again, shook his head, and pulled his sling ring from his pocket, which he used to open a portal, just big enough to reach his arm through. On the other side of the portal, he pulled open a drawer in what looked like his bedside table. Once he’d grabbed whatever he was looking for, he withdrew his arm and snapped the portal shut.

Then, grinning, he opened his hand, where a very similar box was sitting in his palm. He opened it, and inside was a golden ring. “I should’ve had a ring the first time,” Stephen said. “I thought maybe that was why you didn’t accept.”

Loki’s chest tightened. “No,” he said. “Just me being...well, me.” Swallowing, he took the ring he’d had made for Stephen out of its box, taking Stephen’s left hand in his. As he slid it onto Stephen’s finger, his chest tightened even more. His eyes stung. Oh Norns. Was he going to *cry*?

When the ring was secure on Stephen’s finger, Loki stared at it. Then, he squeezed his eyes shut, hoping that if he closed them tightly enough, the urge to cry would abate. He’d never been able to handle his emotions. Happiness was the hardest of all.

“You being you is all I’ve ever wanted,” Stephen said, as he slipped the ring he was holding onto Loki’s finger. “You’re the love of my life, Loki.”

For heaven’s sake. What was he supposed to do in the face of that? Loki laughed, or possibly sobbed, and grabbed Stephen’s face, kissing him hard. Stephen’s hands came up to cover his and they stood there, and Loki was—

He was happy. He’d had so much happiness for years, more than he thought he deserved, more than he’d ever thought himself capable of. And Stephen Strange was responsible for so much of it. He wanted him forever. And even though he wouldn’t have him forever, they could have as much of each other as they could, for as long as possible.

They stood there kissing, time meaningless, and there was some symbolism there, Loki was quite sure, considering who Stephen was, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care enough to come up with it. They were engaged. Stephen had called him the love of his life.

When they finally separated, Loki bumped his forehead against Stephen’s and rested it there, his eyes closed. He could tell, even without being able to see it, that Stephen was still smiling.

“I’m still wondering why you thought the goat was a good idea,” Stephen said.

Oh.

Loki pulled back. Furrowing his brow, he said, “I’m supposed to slaughter her to serve at our wedding feast.”

“Yeah, we’re not doing that,” Stephen said immediately, with a finality that made Loki’s heart swell. “Even putting aside how much I know you *hate* that idea, her name is way too good.”

Loki kissed him again.

“But,” Stephen said, when they stopped, “that does kind of beg the question—am I going to have to do a bunch of Asgardian traditions for the wedding?”

“An Asgardian wedding?” Loki asked, arching an eyebrow.

Stephen shrugged, smiling lopsidedly. “I just assumed.”

An Asgardian wedding. Obviously, yes, it was always going to be an Asgardian wedding. The fact that Stephen had been the one to say it first just proved how right this was. “I love you,” Loki said. “You have no idea how much I love you.”

The lopsided smile on Stephen’s face got softer. “Maybe a little bit of an idea.”

The two of them held each other’s eyes. Then, Loki put his hands on Stephen’s face again, pulling him close and kissing him insistently.

It was one of those things that Loki would look back on for years to come—probably the rest of his life. No matter how long that life was, no matter what came to pass, he had this. He had happiness; he had allowed Stephen to love him, and Stephen allowed Loki to love him back. The years they would have together would all be magic—literal magic, of course. But Loki was feeling sentimental, so: the magic of what was between them, and how much he loved Stephen Strange.

Loki smiled against Stephen’s mouth, put his hands around his back to pull him closer, and let time stop.



Fin! Thank you so so much to all of you for reading this fic, especially those of you who have been leaving me such wonderful comments on each chapter. It's been sort of a rough couple months so I truly can't tell you how much it's appreciated. I love hearing from each and every one of you!

As usual, I'll drop the plug to come hang out with me on [tumblr](#)! Lots and lots of Loki.

Happy New Year! 😊

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